

BY
WOMAN'S
FAVOUR

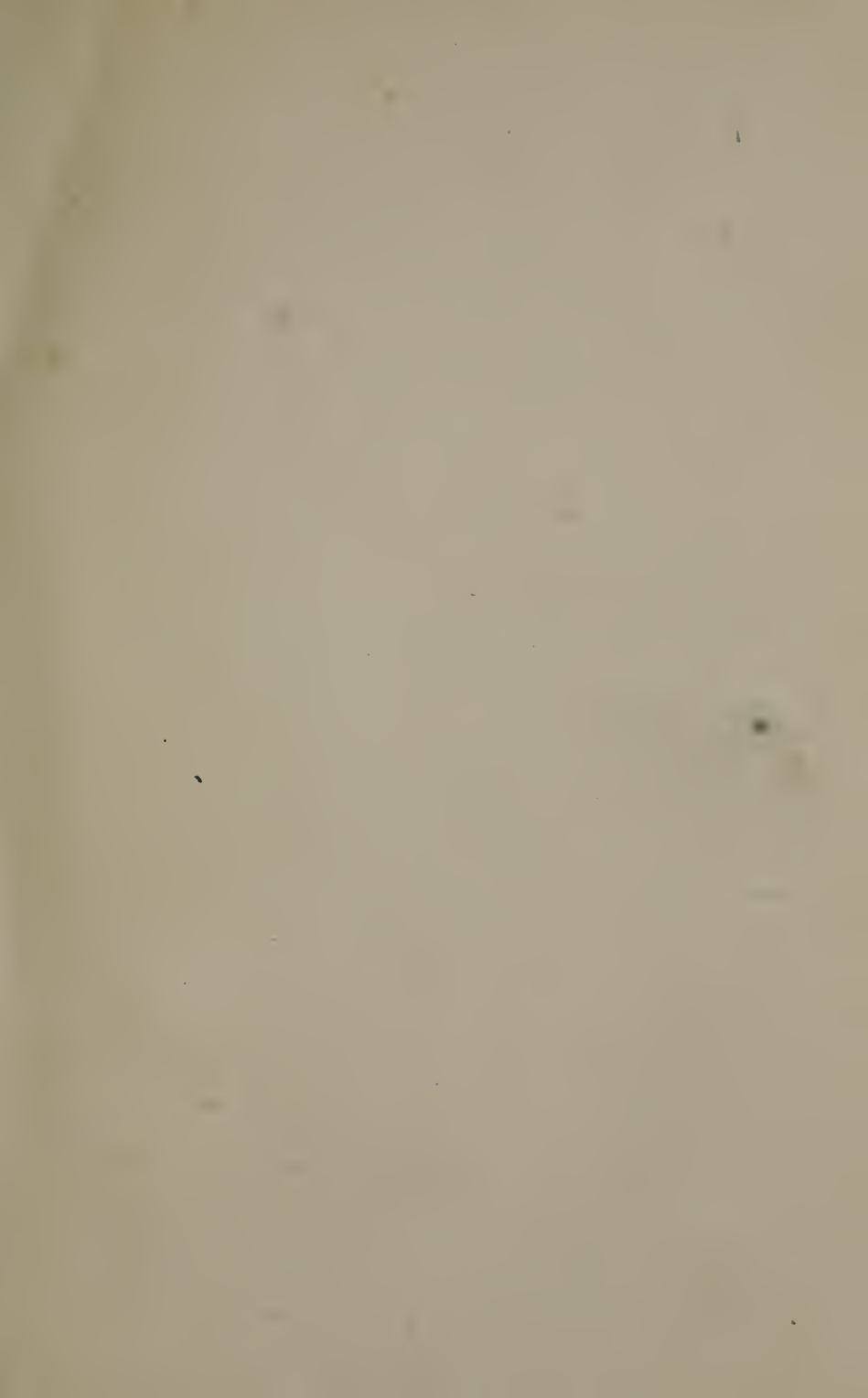




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BY

HENRY ERROLL

AUTHOR OF 'AN UGLY DUCKLING,' 'THE ACADEMICIAN,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. I

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BY WOMAN'S FAVOUR

CHAPTER I

AT THE BELL AND BOOT

THE long low room at the back of the Bell and Boot tavern, Manchester, was filling fast. The freshly sanded floor already bore witness to the fact that it was a wet night outside, while the two long windows rattling gaily in their frames behind the dark green blinds drawn down over them announced that it was gusty as well as wet. Inside, however, things looked comfortable enough ; a huge fire blazed in the old-fashioned grate ;

there was an agreeable reminiscence of tobacco in the atmosphere, not sufficiently strong to be obnoxious, but suggestive of many past and pleasant pipes, and anticipatory of many more. The room was brilliantly lighted by gas, the walls were decorated with a choice selection of oleographs, which Mr. Collins, the landlord, considered were quite as good to look at as those pictures on which the "paint was fresh"; there was a cheerful tinkling of glasses from the bar at the end of the passage; and altogether, as Mr. Wilkins, the master tailor from the corner, remarked, it would have been hard to find a more inviting place in which to spend a convivial evening.

'Not that the missus likes me to come here of a night,' he added to the man who had come in with him, and who was, like himself, engaged in taking off his coat and

muffler. ‘She does not like it. “Stop at home, William, there’s a dear,” she always says, but as I says to her, a man must have a little fresh air sometimes, I says, he’s bound to have it.’

‘I wonder what the women think as we do when we get outside the door?’ observed the other, a baker, with hair the colour of his own whole-meal bread, and an apologetic, rub-his-hands sort of air.

‘Think? Who ever heard of a woman thinking?’ here scornfully interposed a new comer, a young man with a blue tie, a nose too short for his face, and a carefully cultivated but somewhat attenuated moustache. ‘A woman was not intended to think, her Maker did not furnish her with the materials.’

‘Hallo, Mostyn, at it again?’ laughed the tailor; ‘always abusin’ the women, poor

things! But you made a slip there, my boy. You said "her Maker." Thought you didn't allow as anybody had any Maker at all?'

He winked at his friend the baker as he finished, with the air of one who has successfully put a spoke in another man's wheel; but young Mostyn, who was a clerk in a timber-yard, and considered shopkeepers very inferior to himself, merely looked witheringly at him and vouchsafed no reply.

'I hate that chap,' said Wilkins in an undertone, returning Mostyn's scowl with interest; 'he's always crying down women, and saying they're no good. It's like his cheek to compare himself to some of 'em. Why, look at my Martha. I won't deny but what she's a trifle sharp sometimes, but so's my scissors, and they'll cut wrong if you

don't handle 'em right. But just look at her all round. Up early and late from the beginning of the year to its end, cuttin', contrivin', managin', handy at everything, from blacking a grate to givin' me a turn with the machine, and never tired with it all. A young jackanapes like that ain't fit to take such a woman's name in his mouth at all.'

'Still,' observed Simpson the baker, 'some of 'em are queer ones.'

'Well?' retorted Wilkins defiantly, 'and what about us? Ain't some of us queer? Don't some of us leave our bills unpaid, and a poor tradesman to get the cloth and everything? Don't some of us drink away every farthing we make, and make our wives get food for the children where they can? You must look at the thing all round, you see. When I fit on a coat,

I ain't content to look at the back of it only—no, I go all round, so as I see it from every point of view. Pint of bitter, Bill,' he concluded, addressing the potman, who was going the round of the long table, which by this time was nearly full, to take each man's order.

'Have you got a song for us to-night, Simpson?' called a voice from the other end of the room.

The baker blushed.

'No, not exactly a song,' he said nervously, 'I am afraid I couldn't sing to-night, the flour gets into a fellow's voice so.'

'Poor lile chap!' here observed a burly farmer-looking man, in a tone of mock pity and a broad Lancashire accent.

There was a general laugh, in which Simpson tried to join with a good grace.

‘Well, if Simpson’s a floury one to-night,’ said the first man, ‘I’m sure Sam’l Brierly ’ll give us a song, unless the beer has got into his voice.’

Another roar followed this sally, after which Mr. Brierly expressed his exceeding readiness to oblige.

‘But where’s our chairman? It ain’t square to begin without him,’ said Wilkins, looking towards the head of the table, where stood the armchair of honour, as yet unfilled.

‘Burning the midnight oil,’ suggested some one.

‘Or his own poems,’ amended another.

‘No such luck,’ said young Mostyn disagreeably.

‘Ah, it wouldn’t be luck,’ said Wilkins, turning round upon his *bête noire*; ‘we all know that poetry and that ain’t got any

charms for you, you're too taken up with molecules and atoms; but let me tell you, George Collins has given us, in this room here, many a pleasant half-hour with his pretty pieces, and that's more than ever you've done with your scientific jargon, that you're too grand to explain—or too ignorant,' he added in an undertone, intended for Mr. Simpson's ear.

'Hear! hear!' called out everybody, and young Mostyn found himself where he very often was, in a minority of one.

'I didn't mean to say anything against Collins,' he said sulkily; 'but even if he is such a great poet, I don't see why he should keep us all waiting. I vote we commence without him.'

'Here he is,' said Wilkins, as the door opened, and a man of about twenty-eight entered the room.

He stepped quickly into his place, his movements being noticeable from the extreme lightness which characterised them, and which contrasted strongly with the slow, heavy motions of the other occupants of the room.

George Collins, only son of the landlord of the Bell and Boot, was a slight particularly well-made man, standing six feet one in his stockings. He had light brown hair, a good brow, an aquiline nose, a mouth well furnished with even white teeth, but with rather thin lips, and a square determined chin. His eyes were of that peculiar shade of light gray which sometimes looks blue, sometimes green, sometimes a mixture of blue, green, and gray. They were well shaped, and large enough. His face was clean shaven, except for a pair of small whiskers, two or three shades lighter than

his hair. He was dressed in a rather loud suit of light tweeds, not very appropriate to the season, and wore a ring with a precious stone of dubious origin on the little finger of his left hand.

Altogether a very good-looking, well-set-up young man, and one who, despite his flashy ring and showy clothes, appeared altogether superior to his surroundings.

There was a certain consciousness of this fact in his bearing and expression as he looked round upon the assembled company, whose faces, without exception, were turned towards him.

‘Sorry to be so late,’ he said carelessly, in an accent which, though not free from the North Country burr, was nevertheless a good deal purer than that of most of those present.

His apology was received graciously by

all except young Mostyn, who muttered something to the only confidant he possessed, his moustache, and the proceedings of the evening began.

A good many songs and a good deal of beer went the round of the long table. Samuel Brierly surpassed himself in an exceedingly sentimental ditty, the very reverse of what one would have expected from the rough Caliban-like blacksmith. Mr. Simpson, after having poured enough liquid down his long thin throat to clear away a peck of flour, was prevailed upon to 'oblige' with a composition of his own—a song in the course of which various political names were introduced with great effect, and whose chorus, in which the whole company joined, had a main burden apparently drawn from some reminiscence of his childhood, consisting in the words

‘Rub-a-dub dub,’ repeated with every varying tone and shade of which those expressive words are capable. This song was vociferously applauded, and was only not encored because, as among other merits it possessed fifteen verses, the evening was already well advanced by the time it came to an end.

It was noticeable that Simpson the baker before he had sung, and Simpson the baker after he had sung, were two distinct beings. The first was a timid, retiring man, with shy watery blue eyes: the second was a valiant blade, who tossed his head and emptied his glass with quite a rollicking air. The Bell and Boot often saw the second Simpson, but Mrs. Simpson had been wooed and won by, and had lived for twenty years with, the first Simpson, and had, alas for female

credulity ! no suspicion of the existence of the second.

Various other songs followed ; voices grew loud and boisterous, eyes began to shine, jokes became rougher, but the men were all good-tempered and bent on enjoying themselves. They were nearly all old cronies, who knew each other's soft places and little weaknesses, the strength of each other's heads, and in some instances the weight of each other's fists. Except young Mostyn, every one there would have put his hand in his pocket to help his neighbour, and expected his neighbour to do as much for him. There was a good deal of mutual admiration among them, an exaggerated admiration, perhaps, for each other's 'parts,' but they were none the worse for that, though young Mostyn sneered at the en-

thusiasm with which Simpson's song was received, and at the roars of laughter with which Brierly's mild jokes were greeted.

'What's the matter with George this evening?' whispered Simpson to Wilkins.

The tailor cast a shrewd glance up to where George Collins was sitting in his presidential chair.

'I don't know. He do seem a bit hipped-like, don't he?'

George had been performing his duties as chairman correctly enough, but with a distracted air, as if his mind were far away from the place in which his body was compelled to be. During Simpson's long song he had sat drumming time with his fingers on the table before him, his eyes fixed on vacancy, his lips tightly closed. Now, when Wilkins addressed him,

he gave an almost imperceptible start, and opened and shut his eyes once or twice, as if awakening from sleep.

‘Won’t you give us summat now?’ asked Wilkins. ‘It’s your turn, and you’ve been doin’ nothin’ all evenin’ but blink your eyes like a great sleepy owl.’

‘His head’s so full, it makes him drowsy,’ said some one.

George smiled a somewhat condescending smile, which showed to advantage his dazzlingly white teeth.

‘What shall I give you, friends?’ he asked in the mellow voice of which they were all so proud.

‘Summat of y’r own,’ said two or three voices simultaneously.

The smile grew broader, and the gray eyes darkened.

‘Well,’ he said indulgently, standing up.

‘Theatrical beast!’ muttered young Mostyn to his moustache.

There was instant silence, and all faces turned eagerly towards the chairman. He was their nightingale, their *rara avis*, the gem of their collection.

George Collins had not stood up to sing, he rarely sang at these meetings, although he possessed a baritone voice, whose only fault was its lack of cultivation. He recited in tones full of harmony a poem of his own which no one present had ever heard before, but which was calculated to go straight to the hearts of all of them.

It was only a homely little domestic story, plainly enough told, in the strong, nervous dialect familiar to every one there; the pathos was perhaps a trifle strained, the metaphor sometimes mixed and incongruous; but the lines ran easily, the

story appealed strongly to feelings softened by good ale and good fellowship ; and, above all, it was told in a voice which seemed able to command the whole gamut of emotions, a voice which passed with skilful gradation from grave to gay, which rang out trumpet-like at one moment, and the next sank to tones tender and sweet as those of a mother lulling her child to sleep.

When George Collins ceased to speak there was a universal burst of applause.

‘Brayvo, George, that do beat all!’ cried Wilkins enthusiastically. Mr. Simpson, overcome with sympathy and beer, furtively wiped his eyes with a blue spotted handkerchief, and young Mostyn assumed as indifferent an air as possible, although inwardly he was burning with jealousy.

George received the united compliments

of the assembly with a somewhat complacent smile.

‘When did you make that piece, George?’ inquired Sam Brierly.

‘Last night,’ replied the young man. ‘I could not sleep, so I got up and wrote it down. It’s only a little thing.’

‘Nay, nay,’ began Brierly, when he was interrupted by a voice which increased in volume as it came down the passage.

‘George! George!’ it cried.

‘That’s your dad, George,’ said Wilkins.

‘Your Awful Dad!’ supplemented young Mostyn.

George moved uneasily, and was just going to get up when the door was flung open, and a grizzled bullet-like head appeared.

‘Your mother wants ye, George, I called ye loud enough.’

‘Can’t she do without me just now?’
said the young man sulkily.

‘Nay, she cannot. Bill’s sprained his wrist, and she wants thee to draa th’ ale —so coom at once.’

The head was withdrawn and the door banged to.

With a dull red flush mounting to his brow George descended from his official position, and walked slowly out of the room.

‘Rather hard that on a poet,’ observed Mostyn with a malicious grin.

‘Ay, the old woman’s a tough customer,’ returned Wilkins. A deep drawn ‘Ay,’ almost like a sigh, from all near confirmed the statement.

‘I wonder the young chap stands it,’ remarked some one.

‘Beggars can’t choose,’ said Mostyn

grimly, 'and Collins is like the man in the Bible in one respect at least, he cannot dig, nor do anything else useful that I ever heard of, except "draa th' ale,"' he concluded, with a very successful imitation of old Collins's voice and accent.

'Ah, one of these fine days they'll be calling "Geoorge," and there won't come no answer,' said Brierly, getting up to go. 'He's many a time said he'd go off to London, and stay here no longer. It's my belief he could make a good living there, with his singin' and pomes. They're but a poor soft set down yonder, as I've always heard.'



CHAPTER II

TO LONDON

SAM Brierly had no idea how soon his prophecy was to be fulfilled. It was but a few days after the meeting at the Bell and Boot that George Collins announced to his father and mother that he had made up his mind to go to London—with their good wishes and permission if they chose to extend these to him, without them if they were not inclined to bestow them upon him.

The question was one that had been often mooted before, and invariably with the same

result. The elder Collins, sturdily backed up by his wife, had always refused to provide funds for his son to 'moodle away down yonder,' and George, whether from lack of courage to face the world penniless, or from reluctance to grieve the two old people, had given up the desire time after time.

His parents had grown to look upon the subject as a necessary evil, something like the payment of taxes, or gas and water rates, and had begun to launch forth into the well-worn old arguments, when George stopped them.

'No, father, that won't do this time,' he said. 'You've put me off and denied me my wish until I'm almost too old to begin anything new. But all the same I'm determined now that I'll have a try at making my way in London, and so I tell

you plainly that if you and mother won't give me leave I'll take it and go in spite of you.'

'Your boots won't last out the tramp to London, man,' observed his father with a wink at his wife.

'We won't give you any brass to spend that way,' added Mrs. Collins decisively.

'I've not asked you for any yet,' said George, with a significant absence of the irritation usually shown by him at any allusion to his dependent condition.

He took up his hat and went out, flinging the door to behind him. The old couple looked at each other apprehensively.

'Jane, he's gotten brass!' said the father solemnly.

'Ay—it looks so, he's so bold!' answered the mother.

‘Wheer can he have gotten it?’ said old Collins.

‘I cannot think. I’ll have a good turn-out of his room directly, and see if I can find it,’ returned Mrs. Collins, heaving her voluminous person out of her chair, and trotting away.

Her search, although it comprised hiding-places that would have done a jackdaw credit, resulted in nothing but dirt and dust, and George’s parents made up their minds that if their son was in reality possessed of any secret hoard he carried it upon himself.

Mr. Collins was a single-hearted and simple-minded old man. When he had anything in view he always took the very straightest road towards his object. His son had not known him these twenty-eight years for nothing; it was therefore

with no feeling of surprise that he awoke in the small hours of the night following the announcement of his decision, to find his elderly parent, with a cunningly-shaded light, carefully and minutely examining each portion of the clothing which George had left upon a chair at the foot of his bed.

Convinced by George's hypocritically deep breathing that his son was sound asleep, the old man calmly passed every article in review, shaking, feeling, smoothing it out, but all to no purpose. Beyond a tramway ticket and an envelope scribbled over with verses, which last he threw from him as if it had bitten him, Mr. Collins found absolutely nothing.

His search completed, he approached the bed in which the hope of his house lay, to all appearance, sound asleep. With the

utmost caution he passed his hand beneath the pillow, first on one side then on the other of his son's head, but there was nothing there. As he was withdrawing his hand, disappointed, George, unable to resist a mischievous impulse, moved his arm restlessly and caught hold of his father's wrist. The old man gave a muttered exclamation of dismay, and George, afraid that he might laugh, opened his eyes, and fixed them upon his visitor with well-feigned astonishment.

‘You, father!’ he exclaimed, starting up in bed. ‘Is anything amiss.’

‘Naught, naught, my lad, naught,’ replied the old man, with a very rueful countenance. ‘I—I—I only came to see—if you were there still all right. Good-night, lad, good-night.’

He took his candle and hurriedly

departed, having no wish whatever to prolong the conversation.

George covered himself up again and laughed quietly.

‘Poor old boy! does he think I can’t see through him! It isn’t for love of me that they want me—it’s only not to give me any money. If I had’n’t borrowed, begged, pinched, to get those poor little ten pounds I might have vegetated here till doomsday. They have no ambition for me—no perception of my gifts. Strange, that I should be the son of such a sordid, soulless old couple!’

With these edifying reflections he fell asleep, sure that his father would leave him undisturbed for the remainder of the night, or that, even if he should take it into his head to pay him a second domiciliary visit, he would never think of looking in the

water-jug, at the bottom of which reposed the ten golden sovereigns which were to accompany George in his wanderings.

The very next morning the old familiar cry of 'George! George!' resounded as usual throughout the passages, garden, and stables of the Bell and Boot, but no impatient voice shouted back a reply. There was no 'George' forthcoming, and the old people, looking at each other with dismayed eyes, were forced to come to the conclusion that their son had kept his word, and had left them for that London which, to their simple minds, seemed nearly as far off as Iceland or India.

By that time, indeed, George had been gone some hours. He spent part of the morning in Manchester, providing himself with a few absolute necessities, such as a bag in which to put the things he had

brought away in a parcel from the Bell and Boot, a new hat, and some collars and cuffs.

‘It won’t do to look shabby,’ he said to himself; ‘but I must cut my wants short, for it may be some time before I can get an engagement.’

His shopping done and a modest luncheon swallowed, he made his way to the station, and took a ticket. In spite of himself his voice gave a quiver as he pronounced the magic words ‘Third, London.’

‘The clerk must have thought me a queer sort of chap to ask for my ticket as if I was going to cry!’ he thought, as he gathered up the change; and it would perhaps have disappointed him if he had known that as a matter of fact the clerk had not noticed his voice at all.

In the third-class carriage into which he got was a working man with a bristly

chin and a small bundle by his side. George placed himself opposite, and immediately began to talk to him.

‘Are you going to London, mister?’ he asked.

The bristly-chinned man turned two bloodshot eyes upon him and growled out something that might be taken as a negative.

‘I am,’ said George. ‘Looking for work, friend?’

The man gave another growl, in which, qualifying George’s epithet with a quite unnecessary and inappropriate adjective, he was understood to say that ‘he didn’t want none of his ——— friends.’

George, nothing daunted, for he had been used to rough things at the Bell and Boot, said pleasantly,

‘Ay—it’s a hard world, mate, ’specially for the poor!’

The bristly man glanced superciliously at George's clothes, which, though cheap and common enough, seemed to him, poor wretch, as smart and good as a man could have, and raising his voice a little, said,

'Ere, you let me be. I don't want none of your damn swells' talk 'ere. You're all of yer ready to talk, but when it comes to givin' a cove sixpence, you ain't on—not you. You let me be.'

George laughed pleasantly.

'Swells' talk!' he said. 'I'm no swell, mate. I'm a working man like yourself, as poor as poor need be. What trade are you?'

'I'm out o' work—that's my trade,' answered the man as surlily as before.

Here the guard blew his whistle, just as a woman and her child climbed hurriedly into the compartment.

‘Hold up, missus!’ said George, steady-
ing the woman as she almost fell. ‘Give
me the bairn. There, that’s right, now
you’re in. What a pretty child! And
what do they call you?’ he asked the little
girl.

‘Allie,’ piped the child; and George,
abandoning his attempts to soften the
bristly-chinned man, devoted himself for
the next hour or so to his two more inter-
esting fellow-passengers.

The mother, who, as her dress showed,
was a widow, soon became confidential,
and related most of her history from her
birth upwards, to all of which George,
the little girl upon his knee, listened with
the greatest apparent interest, although in
reality his thoughts were taken up with
his own affairs. When the widow had
wound up with the information that she

was going to London to live with her sister, who, like herself, was a dressmaker, she went to sleep, and it became the little girl's turn.

‘Tell me a story,’ she said, as soon as her mother's fretful, complaining voice was no longer to be heard.

Somewhat to her astonishment George began a story at once. It was all about a boy who went out into the world to seek his fortune, and found a very splendid fortune indeed. Everything went well with him, and he became a rich and powerful prince.

George was quite as much interested in the adventures of his hero as his little listener. As the story proceeded his dialect and accent became more and more marked, until they were almost as pronounced as his father's. His eyes shone

and his language was full of poetry, as he described the fortunes of the poor lad in whom, probably, he all unconsciously saw his own self. The child listened breathlessly, and when at length the story came to an end, she said directly,

‘Tell me another.’

But a new passenger had just got in, and George, to whom everybody seemed quite specially interesting that day, turned to look at him.

He sat down opposite George, in the seat which the surly workman had quitted a few stations back, and taking off his hat, proceeded to wipe his head and face vigorously with a large and dingy silk handkerchief. He was a man of about fifty, tall and stout, with dark very much oiled hair parted in the middle, small brown eyes, the whites of which were so

only in name, for their real colour was yellow, a portentous nose which somehow looked swollen, and which was adorned with many little red-streaked veins about the tip, a thick moustache waxed and twisted at the ends, and a shaven chin which, like the rest of his complexion, was spotted and unhealthy looking. His tie was a gaudy mixture of green and red, his greatcoat light cinnamon in colour, and very much too tight in the body, giving him a sausage-like and altogether apoplectic appearance, far from becoming. He wore a seedy white hat with a black band, put rakishly on one side of his head, and a ring on his little finger with a large stone, the doubtful brilliance of which matched George's own.

He panted and blew and mopped himself comfortable, and then, taking out an

enormous and nearly black cigar with a label round it, he lighted it and began to puff out volumes of smoke. During these operations he had examined his fellow-passengers, and now addressed himself to George, speaking in a peculiarly thick voice, which, together with his appearance, George, who had all the experience of a son of the Bell and Boot, knew meant *drink*.

‘Your little gurl, sir?’ pointing towards the child on George’s knee with his cigar.

George explained. ‘And I’m very fond of little ones,’ he added.

‘Ah, h’m,’ said the stout man, thrusting forward his lower lip in a way he had, ‘I can’t say I share your feeling. They cost too much and do too little for my taste;’ and he laughed a sort of stifled throat laugh, which seemed to be his nearest approach to merriment.

George laughed too.

‘Have you any of your own?’ he asked.

‘One, sir, one, but thank the Lord, she’s grown up, and don’t wear ’er boots out every ten minutes nowadays.’ He gurgled again, and then said,

‘Goin’ to London, sir?’

‘I am,’ answered George. ‘For the first time.’

‘Bless me!’ said the stout man. ‘But I thought so.’

‘Why?’ asked George reddening.

‘Oh, I don’t know exactly,’ said the other. ‘A kind of a air, don’t yer know, dear boy. Something rooral, mild-like——’

‘Green, I suppose you mean,’ said George rather sulkily.

‘Well, dear boy, suppose we put it at that—suppose we put it at that. But no offence meant, you know, none at all,’ he

hastened to add; 'no offence meant, and none taken, I 'ope?'

'None,' said George, ashamed of his touchiness.

'Going to friends, I presoom?' asked the stout man after a pause, during which he had carefully examined his nails, which to a critical observer left a good deal to be desired from the point of view of cleanliness, but with which he himself appeared perfectly satisfied.

'No,' said George. 'I don't know no one—I mean any one in London.'

The stout man pricked up his ears.

'Goin' into business?'

'I'm going to try to get on the stage, for one thing,' said George, who saw no reason for reticence.

'Ha!' said the stout man, becoming suddenly animated. 'As a singer?'

‘No, answered George decidedly, ‘as an actor.’

‘H’m,’ said the other, falling back again into his old attitude. ‘What line are you in?’

‘None at all at present,’ said George, ‘I’m only going to begin now.’

‘Rather old?’ suggested the stout man, with a glance at him.

‘Never mind, better late than never,’ said George with a forced laugh. ‘Besides that, I—I—want to publish some verses.’

The stout man gurgled.

‘Verses, oh lor! Comic?’

‘Certainly not! said George indignantly.

‘Well, the other sort ain’t in my style,’ said the stout man; ‘but as to the stage—— Look here, young man,’ he went on abruptly, after a short pause, ‘where are you goin’ to stop at in London?’

'I don't know yet,' answered George with some hesitation; 'I must look for a room as soon as I get there.'

'Ow's the 'oof? Plenty?' asked the man.

George shook his head expressively.

'Well now, I tell you what it is, young feller,' said the stout man; 'it ain't often that I take a fancy to any one. If you knew any of my pals they'd tell you the same; but I don't know how it is, I seem to 'ave taken one to you. London's a queer sort of place, and a fresh 'un like you's apt to get sharpened there. Now I'll tell you what I'll do for you. You want a room in a nice, quiet, respectable neighbourhood, don't you?'

'Yes,' said George.

'And board as well as lodgin'? You'd better combine the two,' as George hesi-

tated, 'it's much cheaper and better. Is that what you want?'

George signified his assent.

'You want to be took in and cared for, just like that child on your knee,' continued the stout man, seeming to take a kind of pleasure in enlarging on George's helplessness.

'Well now,' he said, taking out a greasy letter-case from an inner pocket, and rummaging among its contents, 'I think I know—just by chance—the very thing that 'll suit you.'

He produced, after some search, a somewhat dingy card, which he handed to George.

It bore this inscription in printed letters—

Mrs. MELLON,

193 HYPATIA STREET,

CAMDEN TOWN, N.W.

‘That lady,’ pursued the stout man, leaning forward, and laying one finger on George’s knee, ‘I can confidently recommend, and no one has a better right to it than me, for I have known her long and intimate. She’ll do for you like a mother, and reasonable too, which is more than some mothers are, ain’t it? Ha, ha! Now ’ere we are,’ as the train rolled into Euston. ‘Go there, that’s my advice. If you don’t like it you needn’t stop, but I’m a old stager, and you believe *me*, you can’t do better. Ta-ta;’ and with a nod he was out of the carriage and lost among the crowd, before George could give an answer of any kind.



CHAPTER III

HYPATIA STREET

HAVING elicited from a porter the information that Camden Town was 'not as far off as some other places,' George, bag in hand, set off to walk to Hypatia Street, as he thought it would be just as well to go and judge for himself what kind of a place it was. He found it necessary to inquire his way every few minutes, and for a long time no one seemed able to direct him to the particular street he wanted. At length, however, a small boy, with a pennyworth of treacle in a jar in

one hand and quite a farthing's worth of the same agreeable condiment on his face and forefinger, on being appealed to for Hypatia Street said briskly, 'I knows 'im. You come along o' me. I lives at No. 250 myself.'

George walked meekly along beside his small conductor, whose sharp little eyes had looked him all over in a moment.

'What number do yer want?' asked the boy.

'193, my lad,' answered George.

'I know. Mother Mellon, ain't it?'

'Ay,' said George.

The small boy laughed convulsively, then dipped his finger in the treacle and licked it all round, leaving a kind of high-water mark about the second joint, up to which he had sucked off the dirt

as well as the treacle. After this refreshment he observed,

‘My, but she’s a rum old party, ain’t she?’

‘I don’t know her yet,’ said George.

‘Oh—h!’ said the boy disparagingly.
‘And don’t you know Lucy, neither?’

‘Who’s Lucy?’ asked George.

‘Why, their gal—Mellon’s gal, of course. And ain’t she a beauty, too! Ha, I rather believe you, my boy. Now, then, this ’ere’s *my* manshin. Yours is lower down, straight as yer nose, yer can’t miss it.’

Presenting his friendly guide with a penny, upon which that young gentleman spat copiously ‘for luck’ before transferring it to his pocket, George walked on down the street, which stretched before him without any apparent end to it.

It was a curious place, George thought.

A kind of historical street, representing various stages of the progress of man. At the end at which George had entered were what might be called the primeval dwelling-places—small, sordid-looking, tumble-down cottages, with rooms opening straight on to the road, and windows carefully constructed to keep out as much air as possible. At the doors of these houses leaned slatternly women, with frowsy hair hoisted up in an untidy knot behind, and torn or gaping aprons and dresses. Children in nondescript clothing, coated all over with mud and dirt, played and fought in the road in front, which was apparently a handy receptacle for all the old boots, sardine-tins, and condensed milk cans not required by their parents within. Marbles and rounders seemed to be the two favourite games, and these were kept up from morning till

night to an accompaniment of shrill yells and cries that made the more select inhabitants of Hypatia Street despairingly ask, 'Where, oh where is the school-board?'

A little farther on came a long row of thinly-built, three-storied, card-like houses, which looked as if they would instantly collapse if leaned against. These had been painted white once, 'long, long ago,' but their colour was only a legend, and was believed in by no one but their owners, who fondly called them the 'white 'ouses,' and were always looking forward to the long-promised day when the landlord should restore them to their pristine colour. Still, dingy as they were, they were a great improvement on the low little places beyond, and might be taken to represent the 'middle ages' of Hypatia Street. They were let out in rooms, or sets of rooms, the

landlord making a tour every Saturday to secure his rent.

It was in the first of these that George's guide resided, leaving him to continue his way by himself. He had to cross over several times, as the numbers of the houses in Hypatia Street seemed to have been put in a bag, and then shaken up well and taken out at random. At length, however, he found the one he was looking for. It was the third of a row of six, all belonging to one man, who might be considered the emblem and sign of modern civilisation and cultivated taste. 'Natty,' he called them, and natty they certainly were.

They were only one story high, and the story had one window over the front door and one over the parlour, which boasted of an elegant bow-window. They were built of red and yellow brick, picked out

with white, and had a most elaborate parapet to the roofs, which gave 'style to the 'ole,' as their owner was wont to observe. But their great charm, distinguishing them from the common houses near, lay in their flight of doorsteps. No mere rough slabs of stone these, with flaws and cracks which even the most devoted hearth-stoning was incapable of disguising; no two or three steps either, scarcely raising your front door above the level of the street; but a real good flight of twelve steps, broad, smooth, and solid, with a balustrade on either hand, and—greatest triumph of all—a stucco flower vase on each side of the door. The steps were high and steep—they looked as if they had set out to climb to the roof, and had only with difficulty been arrested mid-way—and one of their chief merits was that their height rendered it

absolutely impossible for the dwellers on the plains below to see what you took in for your dinner, a merit which was not without its importance in the eyes of the favoured occupants of the six houses.

George, who had a wonderfully quick eye for such details, took in all this at a glance as he crossed the road in front of No. 193. He noted that Mrs. Mellon's house was the smartest and best kept of the six—short white curtains tied back with blue in the two top windows, long white curtains in the parlour-window, which was further adorned by a little round table with a white crochet-work cover, and a stand of wax flowers and fruit, covered with an extremely glittering glass shade. The steps, too, were spotlessly clean, and looked as if no profane foot had ever trodden upon their snowy surface.

‘It seems promising enough!’ he thought, as he rang the highly polished bell.

A door within shut audibly, and footsteps approached the hall-door, the distinctness with which they could be heard proving that the builder of the smart houses had thought more of externals than of solidity. The door opened, and a woman stood before George.

‘Mrs. Mellon?’ said he, taking off his hat with an air copied from the young men-about-town of Manchester.

‘Yes—s,’ replied the woman in a drawling voice and evidently foreign accent. ‘That is me. You want?’

George produced the card his fellow-traveller had given him.

‘A gentleman I met in the train gave me this,’ he said. ‘As I was a stranger in

London, he thought it might be of use to me. I am looking for a room.'

'Ah yes,' she said, with a wave of her hand towards the parlour window, 'you see I have one to let.'

In effect, there was a card with 'Bedroom to let' sticking in the window.

'Come in, come in,' said the woman. 'I shall show you the room.'

She took him straight upstairs into a small back room, which, with two others, comprised the whole of the top story. It was comfortable enough, plain as it was, for George, who had not been spoiled by luxury, and he said he would take it.

'And the gentleman said you would board me as well as lodge me, missus, he added.

'Oh yes, I will board you.'

'How much a week?' asked George.

‘Ten shillings a week for your room, breakfast, tea, and whole board on Sunday, fifteen shillings if you dine at ’ome every day,’ answered the woman promptly.

‘That’ll do all right.’

‘You ’af references?’ she asked.

‘No, I don’t know any one in London; but if I pay a week in advance that’ll do as well, eh, missus?’

‘Better!’ she said, with a smile that lighted up her whole face.

George produced a sovereign, which she took with evident satisfaction.

‘That is all settled now; then,’ she said, ‘you will better come downstairs, and haf some tea with me.’

Leaving his overcoat and bag in his room, George followed Mrs. Mellon past the parlour door, down a very steep flight of wooden stairs, into a room which, owing

to the height of the front-door steps, was on a level with the little strip of garden.

‘You see I make you at ’ome at once,’ said Mrs. Mellon, pushing a well-worn arm-chair to the fire, and motioning George towards it. ‘This is our sitting-room. We let the parlour opstairs sometimes, and sometimes we don’t. That is as may be. Jost now it is let to a gentleman in the City, who boards with us as you will do.’

The room was a good-sized one, with a light, bright paper, hung with sundry chromos of a cheerful description. There were a great many photographs about everywhere, the mantelpiece being crowded with them, as well as a small table near the window. On another table was a litter of scraps of velvet and silk, feathers and flowers. An enormous cat lay purring before the fire, which jumped on its

mistress's knee directly she had sat down in the chair from which George's ring had disturbed her.

Mrs. Mellon herself was about forty, but she was neither 'fat' nor 'fair.' On the contrary, she was extremely slight, and dark almost to swarthinness. Her hair had grown prematurely gray, and contrasted quite oddly with her olive cheeks, black eyebrows, and bright bead-like brown eyes. There was still a great quantity of it, and it seemed of a curly and rebellious nature; for though there had been an evident attempt to part it in the middle and brush it down neatly on each side of the forehead, it had a tendency to struggle loose from its bonds, and required constant coaxing back, which its owner did with a curious quick movement of a little brown smooth-skinned hand.

There was something in the quaint simplicity of her straight black gown and in the absence of all frivolous adornment which struck George's quick apprehension as incongruous with the woman herself. She looked, he thought, as if she were dressed up for a part, and as if she might suddenly go away, and come back a coquettish, smartly-dressed, be-furbelowed little Frenchwoman, which was, he felt sure, what nature had intended her to be.

Stroking the cat on her knee, she fixed her pleasant dark eyes on George, and said brightly, 'And now you must tell me all about yourself. Who are you, where you do come from, and what you are going to do. You must look upon me as Maman Mellon, and you shall be my big son, and tell me everything. So do always all

my young men; I am as a mother to them all!’

‘I’ve come from Manchester, where my parents live,’ said George, reserving to himself the right of a judicious choice of facts to be imparted to his new relative’s ear, ‘and I want to go on the stage.’

‘Eh, the stage?’ cried Mrs. Mellon, her dark cheek flushing, ‘you will go on the stage? Aha! then you ’ave something in you, you ’ave spirit, life!’

‘I hope so,’ modestly replied George.

‘Ah, the stage!’ went on Mrs. Mellon, fixing her glowing eyes on the fire, ‘there is nothing like it—nothing! The pretty dresses, the lights, the people, the clapping, the excitement—nothing, nothing in the world is like it! The people in front, they pay their money, they sit in their comfortable seats and think they enjoy themselves.

But no—it is the *artistes*, the performers who enjoy themselves—it is they who are happy. At least, so it was always with me,’ she said with a little laugh; ‘but I remember that the others used to laugh often of me—they are so many of them sticks of wood.’

‘You have been on the stage yourself, then?’ said George, congratulating himself on his good fortune in having happened to come across some one who could ‘show him the ropes.’

‘‘Ave I been on the stage?’ repeated Mrs. Mellon. ‘Ah yes, young man, I almost think I ‘ave. From the time when I was not much bigger than this cat my ‘ole life was on the stage. When I was not performing I was learning. When I was not learning I was practising. ‘Ow ‘ard did I work—and what applause did I gain!’

‘And you have retired? asked George.

‘Ah yes, you think, in spite of my gray hairs, I am still young to retire! That is so; in years, in strength I am but a child still, as *souple*, as active as ever; I could ‘ave gone on for another twenty years at least, but I had an accident; I hurt myself; the doctors all say if I go on again I get ill and cannot recover, and—so *voilà!*’ she ended, with a shrug and an expressive glance round the room.

‘You see,’ she continued after a moment, ‘I was too bold, too daring! Many times was I warned, but no notice did I take. It was jost that I liked—the danger!’

‘The *danger*?’ repeated George, who had never heard that acting was a perilous profession to life and limb.

‘Yes, the danger! Look, young man,’ she said, gesticulating with both hands, so

that the cat on her knee glanced up in lazy astonishment, 'ow would you like to be 'ung in the air, suspended by your feet from a ladder—ah, so many feet high, and 'ave to move, 'ead downwards, from one end of it to the other. And mind you,' she added, growing always warmer and warmer, 'no nets beneath in *my* time. No, if you fall—plomp—you are finished! Would you like that, eh? But I had nerves of steel!'

'Oh, I see,' said George, beginning to realise that Mrs. Mellon and he were talking at cross-purposes. 'And how did you have your accident?'

'It is just ten years ago,' said the little woman; 'my Lucie was ten years old, she is now twenty. I had a trapeze trick to perform just then—a very difficult feat, but a pretty one. My fellow-artiste, who had

to catch me, missed—and I fell—oh, not very far, but I got some internal injuries, and, as I tell you, the doctors forbade me to go on.’

‘It must have been a great blow to you,’ said George sympathetically.

‘It was a very bad blow—for us all. I think that turned my poor hairs gray. You see I was famous, renowned! I made much money, for people went always to see L’Hirondelle. L’Hirondelle, that was my stage name. You ’ave ’eard it, perhaps?’

George murmured something about thinking he knew the name, but Mrs. Mellon paid no attention to his reply. She suddenly started up, upsetting the cat, which retired with an indignant swelling of its tail beneath the table, went to the looking-glass over the chimney-piece, and began smoothing down the

unruly gray hair on each side of her face.

‘I am forgetting,’ she said in a changed voice, turning again to George; ‘the old Satan lingers in me still.’

‘Wh—what?’ asked George, confused by this sudden transition.

‘Yes,’ said the little woman, glancing down at her prim black frock; ‘for the moment I had forgotten that I have renounced all earthly pomps and vanities. But Satan is lurking always at my elbow, and sometimes, as now, he gets his own way. The wicked, frivolous Hironnelle is dead long ago. Here,’ touching herself gravely upon the forehead, ‘you see Sister Lucretia, of the Army of the Lord! Forget, young man, forget my boastful words. I must punish myself for them!’

To George's relief, for he was at a loss to know exactly what to say, there just now came a ring at the bell.

'It's Lucie!' cried Mrs. Mellon, and with a light step, which looked almost like a pirouette, she ran from the room.





CHAPTER IV

THE CUP THAT CHEERS

MRS. MELLON returned almost immediately, followed by a girl still in her hat and jacket.

‘My daughter Lucie,’ she said proudly, ‘my only child and the comfort of my life.’

‘Don’t be absurd, ma!’ said the girl. ‘What is this gentleman’s name?’

Mrs. Mellon turned with a laugh towards George.

‘I do not really know,’ she said. ‘I have forgotten to ask.’

‘That’s you all over, ma!’ said the girl half-affectionately, half-crossly.

‘My name is George L’Estrange,’ observed George.

‘What a nice name,’ said Lucy admiringly.

‘L’Estrange! It sounds French,’ said Mrs. Mellon.

‘My ancestors were, I believe, of French extraction,’ returned George; and it is to be hoped that the left ears of the landlord and landlady of the Bell and Boot did not at that moment tingle violently.

Lucy took off her outdoor clothes, having first put down a bandbox she was carrying. She was, as her mother had told George, twenty years old. Tall, and very fair, she offered the most complete contrast to her little dark mother. Her hair was almost flaxen, and very elabo-

rately curled, plaited, and twisted on the top of her head. Her eyes were light gray and large, her cheeks perhaps a trifle too full and too pale, her mouth and teeth more than passable. Lucy Mellon was a remarkably showy girl, and was perfectly aware of the fact.

‘Ain’t we going to have tea, ma?’ she said, in the purest Cockney accent a north countryman could wish to hear.

‘Directly, Lucie, directly,’ answered her mother, jumping up quickly. ‘The gentleman has not long been here and I was so busy making him at home that I quite forgot all about tea. But I will get it in one moment.’

The little woman bustled out of the room. Lucy sat down at the table in the window, and began opening the box she had brought in with her.

‘Ain’t ma funny?’ she said; ‘you’ll soon get used to her, but just at first it’ll put you out a bit.’

‘Your mother isn’t English, is she, miss?’ asked George.

‘Why no, I should think any one could hear that in a moment!’ answered Lucy. ‘She’s French, and though she’s been married over twenty years, and lived in England all that time, she’s French as French can be still.’

‘Do you speak French, miss?’

‘No, not very well, I never could bear it. Give *me* English. But I’m supposed to *be* French in my business, and the little I’ve picked up from ma comes in handy.’

George ventured to ask what her business was.

‘Well,’ said Lucy archly, ‘if I tell you it’s a secret, mind. I don’t tell everybody,

but I think you look as if you were to be trusted,' with a coquettish glance into George's eyes.

George swore eternal secrecy.

'Well, then, I'm Paris Model maker to a lady-milliner.'

'I'm no wiser than before,' said George.

'Lor, how stoopid you men are! Well, first of all, do you know what a lady-milliner is?'

'A—a—person—like you, I suppose?'

Lucy laughed.

'Like me! That's fine! No, my milliner, my employer, is a countess, a real live countess!'

'But,' said George, quite at sea, 'what does she—do you mean she keeps a shop?'

'Yes, to be sure, a shop, just like anybody else's. She's divorced from her husband, because he took and went off

to America with another lady, and so, just to occupy herself like, I suppose, she set up this shop. Why, that's nothing!' she added, laughing at the blank astonishment depicted on George's face. 'Shopkeeping's all the fashion in London nowadays. My countess's place is in Bond Street, and next door but one to us there's a marquis's daughter, a Lady Wilhelmina something or the other, that has a furniture and decorating shop, and then there's the Honourable Enid Vavasour's flower-place, and Lady Myles's dairy, and—oh, lots more.'

'I never heard of such a thing!' exclaimed George.

'Why, where have *you* been brought up?' said Lucy, delighted at having so unsophisticated a creature to enlighten. 'Don't you read the papers?'

‘Sometimes, but I never saw anything like that in ’em.’

‘I never!’ said Lucy.

‘Tea is ready now, Lucie,’ here put in Mrs. Mellon, who had been industriously trotting to and fro all this time with plates and cups and saucers.

‘That’s a mercy!’ answered her daughter, swinging her chair round so as to face the tea-table, ‘for I’m just fagged out. I hope you’ve put plenty of tea in the pot. Ma has never learned yet how to make tea,’ she observed to George, ‘though she makes bang-up coffee. Here, where’s the bag I brought in,’ she exclaimed, getting up and looking about her. ‘I nearly forgot all about ’em.’

She opened the bag, and a shower of periwinkles fell on the plate.

‘Winkles!’ she said triumphantly. ‘Do

you like winkles, Mr. L'Estrange? Ma and me do, don't we, ma?'

'So do I,' said George; and then, being each provided with a pin, they sat round the table, and picked out the luscious morsels with varying skill, Lucy being the most expert, her mother the least.

'You were telling me about your business,' George said presently.

'So I was,' answered Lucy, biting into a large piece of bread and butter. 'Some more tea, ma. Well, you know now what a lady-milliner is, don't you?'

'Yes, a countess or a marchioness.'

'That's about right. Now my countess gets all her things straight from Paris, of course. You know that hats and bonnets always come straight from Paris, don't you?'

'I didn't,' said George.

'What an ignorant young man you are!

Well, they do. No one wouldn't give five or six guineas for a hat that had been made in England by an Englishwoman, and so the countess gets her hats from a Frenchwoman in Paris, only—her Paris is in 'Ypatia Street, and her Frenchwoman is me!'

'But you are nearly a Frenchwoman, and you have absolutely the fingers of a Frenchwoman!' said her mother jealously.

'Oh, I know,' answered Lucy, helping herself to more periwinkles, 'I know I make well enough. The question is, does my lady pay well enough, and the answer is, no, she don't.'

'That is everybody's lot,' said Mrs. Mellon, with a resigned sigh.

'Yes, that's what pa's always girding at, ain't it?' observed Lucy with a curious little laugh.

George had not been certain, up till then,

whether there existed a Mr. Mellon or not. He now asked,

‘Is your father an actor?’

Lucy laughed again.

‘Oh no, he’s not an actor, though he’s had to do with the stage all his life, more or less. Pa’s chairman at the Star Music Hall, not so far from here. When he was younger, before his voice went, he was a singer. It was him as brought out “I’m such a light young man”—you must have heard of it, haven’t you?’

‘Oh, of course,’ said George hastily. ‘And—do you sing, Miss Lucy?’

‘No, I don’t. Pa wanted me to go in for the song and dance business, and of course I should have liked that best, all our friends being in that set, but somehow I couldn’t buckle to it. Don’t know how it was—they say I’ve no ear for music, and that I’m heavy

on my feet. Anyway, it didn't seem to suit me, so I took to the millinery instead.'

'Ah yes !' said her mother, 'I had always hoped that Lucie would become an *artiste*—it seems to me so strange that my daughter should have no taste for the stage. But there it is—and after all, perhaps that it is best so. There are many temptations—many. It is a frivolous and ungodly life.'

'Stuff and nonsense, ma !' said Lucy sharply. 'That's the rubbish they stick into your head at that stupid Army place ; you used to be ever so much nicer before you went there. She's gone and joined that absurd "Army of the Lord" business,' she explained to George.

'Oh, Lucie !' Mrs. Mellon exclaimed reproachfully. 'Ow can you say "absurd"? It is not absurd—they are good and holy

men who direct it, and—and I am going there now, this moment!’ she finished, getting up and shaking the crumbs from her lap.

‘Oh, go on,’ said Lucy good-naturedly ; ‘only take an umbrella, and don’t come home soaked to the skin, as you did last time.’

Mrs. Mellon took down from a peg behind the door a coal - scuttle bonnet of large dimensions, which she put on, or rather into which she put her head, tying it firmly under the chin with broad black ribbons. George could hardly refrain from smiling as she turned towards him, at the sight of the *piquante* French face in its inappropriate frame.

‘Not much Parisian about that, is there?’ laughed Lucy. ‘I didn’t make it, I must tell you, Mr. L’Estrange.’

Mrs. Mellon glanced at her daughter,

then went to the looking-glass and gazed anxiously at her reflection.

‘I do look extremely ogly!’ she confessed with a sigh; and, as if involuntarily, her fingers went to her hair and loosened some of the thick locks upon her forehead. The next moment, with a frown at herself, she pushed them back again.

‘Ah, vanitee, vanitee! how hard to conquer!’ she said remorsefully, turning resolutely away from the glass; and after donning a long, straight, black cloak, a perfect match for the bonnet in unbecomingness, she put her handkerchief and latch-key into a funny little black beaded bag, and took her departure.

‘Poor ma!’ said Lucy, who had already sat down to her work. ‘She’s all for piety and self-denial now! As if she wasn’t quite good enough already, without those

cheating wretches to get hold of her and worry her poor little soul about her sins and hell! Why, ma has never given a thought to herself all the years I've known her—and she's had sorrow and trouble enough, Heaven knows.'

'It must have been a great grief to her when she had to retire,' observed George.

'Ah,' said Lucy, 'I should think it was. It brought a lot more trouble upon her too, for—but it's no use talking about it, and, besides, I've no right to go on to a stranger about our private affairs. If you stop here long enough you'll soon find out all about us, and if you don't, why then you can go without knowing.'

'But I don't want to be a stranger, Miss Lucy,' said George.

Lucy laughed.

'Well, you won't be one long, I daresay.

And so here we are, left all alone to amuse each other. I'm afraid you'll find it very dull sitting there while I work.'

George was pretty well versed in the manners and ways of young women of his own class. He had been a great favourite up in the north.

'Why, I think this is perfectly delightful!' he said. 'I never bargained for such good luck as this; I shall owe my friend in the train one for having sent me here.'

'What friend?'

George told her about his railway acquaintance. Lucy listened attentively, though her busy fingers never stopped.

'What was he like?' she asked, curiously, when George had finished.

He described the outward appearance of the stout man more humorously than flatteringly. To his surprise, Lucy laid

down her needle, leaned back in her chair, and laughed till the tears ran down her cheeks.

‘Oh—ah!’ she gasped. ‘That’s the richest thing I’ve heard for a long time! And so he really gave you ma’s card, and told you she was a great friend of his?’

‘Yes. But why is it so funny, do you know him?’

‘Know him!’ cried Lucy, going into another paroxysm of laughter. ‘Yes, yes, I should think I did know him, but—oh, it is so funny!’

‘But won’t you tell me why?’ said George; ‘one feels so out of it.’

Lucy sat up, dried her eyes, and went on with her work.

‘Yes, I’ll tell you some day, when we are old acquaintances—but not this evening.

And now,' she said, with a bright smile at him, 'you must tell me all about yourself.'

'Just what your mother said!' remarked George.

'Oh! and did you tell her?'

'No—because she——'

'Told you all about herself, I suppose!'

said Lucy laughing. 'That's us women all over. We *are* selfish! You see I told you about myself first, but now it's your turn. So begin at the very beginning, when you were a little boy, and go on to now.'

'But that'll take so long!' objected George modestly.

'Never mind, so much the better—it'll prevent us being dull; and if Mr. Jarvis—that's our other lodger—comes in before you've done, why you can stop like the

Penny Numbers, and begin again to-morrow. So now, go on.'

Nothing loath, George stared steadily into the fire for awhile, as if to collect his memories, and then began—





CHAPTER V

ROMANCING

‘MY life has been a curious one—with a lot of ups and downs,’ said George. ‘I can carry my memory back a great many years, up to the time when I was but a very wee lad. I must tell you, Miss Lucy, that both my father and mother are now very old people, bowed and bent with care and sorrow. They have always been very reticent with me, and it is only by means of putting one thing with another, and treasuring up little hints and trifles in my mind,

that I have been able to piece together for myself some idea of my parents' history. One of my earliest recollections is of riding along on a pony, led by a manservant in livery—silver buttons, you know, and that kind of thing. I almost think'—reflectively—'that his hair was powdered, but I'm not positively certain of that. Anyhow, I'm sure he called me "Master Stanley," and that I wasn't known as George at all in those days. I remember, too, having a little velvet frock with lace about it, and long curled hair, and going down a very wide and shallow oak staircase holding by my nurse's hand. And then I have a sort of vague idea of big fireplaces, with a coat of arms above, and stained glass windows with crests and mottoes on them.'

'My!' murmured Lucy. 'Why, it's like a story!'

‘Then I know I had a little silver mug, which I always drank out of, and of which I was very fond,’ went on George, frowning at the fire as though trying to see more recollections there; ‘and there was a dog, a beautiful wolf-hound, called Bryan, who used to let me play with him. Poor old Bryan! we have him still, but he can never tell me anything.’

‘Those are my earliest remembrances. Of my parents I recollect hardly anything, except that my mother was always dressed in black velvet, and that I was very much afraid of my father. After that there comes a gap—and when I next see myself, it is as a little chap of ten, helping my mother in the small house which she partly let out to lodgers. I have never been able to understand who we really were—what disaster overtook us—how we came to fall

so low. Whenever I have ventured to ask, my mother has always put me off, either with sighs or tears or with anger at my curiosity. My father must have been away at this time, I think, for I never saw him. I was kept busy on errands, cleaning the lodgers' boots, and washing up their dirty plates from morning till night. I remember how I used to think of my pony and black velvet suit, and sob myself to sleep at night.'

'Poor little fellow!' said Lucy softly, wiping away a sympathetic tear from her own cheek.

'Ah, it does me good to tell some one,' went on George warmly; 'and that that some one should be a beautiful, kind-hearted girl like you, Miss Lucy, it's wonderful! All my poor life long I have yearned for sympathy, for some heart which would open to my

sorrow, and would understand and comfort me—but I never thought I should find it! Between my mother and myself there was but little fellow-feeling. She, poor thing, resented her misfortunes, and no wonder! She has never been able to forget that she used to be a lady, and in those early days, before custom had hardened her, I fancy her heart was very sore. She was proud, too, and so was I—it is a family failing—and though we loved each other very much, we said nothing, but each suffered in silence.

‘Then I remember my father being at home—a stern, morose man, full of learning, and always buried in books. He never gave me any education, however, but was always insisting upon it that I was a son of the people, and was to be brought up as such.

‘“ We’ve had enough gentlemen in our

fam'ly, my lad," he used to say to me, "and you see what's come of it. My son must be an honest working man, and able to get his living, which is more than his father can do, for all his fine education."

'My mother, poor soul, though she never contradicted him, thought differently, and used to try at odd moments to teach me what she knew herself. Of course she was fluent in French and Italian. And many's the day that, wooden spoon in one hand and the French grammar in the other, she would stir the lodgers' Irish stew and hear me my French verbs at the same time. But I didn't get on very far like that, as you may suppose, and what little I know now I taught myself at great pains when I grew older. I must have been a strange, dreamy kind of lad, unfit enough for the life I had been forced into. I was always

playing truant, and escaping into the woods and fields with some book of poetry I had stolen from my father's room—for he had kept a few books. As I grew up I took to writing verses myself, and couldn't sleep at nights for the lovely things I thought of and saw. I remember that once a gentleman who is now England's greatest poet lodged for a week or two at our house. I knew his name, and didn't I shine his boots well for him ! I didn't like cleaning the lodgers' boots as a rule, but I was proud to do his. And one day he came into the parlour suddenly, as I was bending over a piece of paper.

“What are you doing, my lad ?” says he.

‘I was very much confused, and tried to hide the paper away, but “Let me see it,” he says, takes it out of my hand and reads it. Then he looks at me very much surprised.

“ Did you write these verses yourself, my man ? ” he says.

“ Yes, sir,” I answered.

“ And do you often write verses ? ” he went on.

“ As often as I have the time, sir,” I answered.

“ Well—go on, my lad,” he says, “ go on, and—you’ll come to something yet.”

‘ You may think, miss, how glad I was when I heard those words. I wrote more than ever after that, and was in hopes of becoming a poet at once, when my father dashed all my plans to the ground by apprenticing me quite suddenly, without ever a yea or a nay from me, to a plumber and builder ! ’

‘ What a shame ! ’ cried Lucy.

‘ Ay, it was hard, but I was only fifteen, and what could I do ? I served my time,

and wrote between whiles, but I was always miserable, and hated my life. As soon as I was out of my time I would have liked to come up to London, but my mother's health had failed, my father had never been able to earn anything worth speaking of—they were dependent on me—so I had to submit. I went as clerk in a wholesale merchant's house—the plumbing and building was out of the question—and there I stayed for many years, until I got a good salary. But all through I meant to come to London as soon as I could, and here, you see, I am at last,' he concluded with a smile.

'And—are your parents living on your savings, then?' inquired Lucy.

'No,' answered George, after a scarcely perceptible pause, 'they came into a little money just lately, so that they are now

independent of me, but I hope to make enough soon to be able to send them some.'

George was naturally eloquent, and he told his story, which was, with the exception of one or two details, purely imaginary, so well that it sounded most pathetic and touching to Lucy.

'Have you got—do you know any of your verses by heart?' she asked timidly. 'I do so doat on poetry!'

'I'll try if I can remember some little thing,' said George, and after a moment's reflection he repeated the poem he had recited on the last evening at the Bell and Boot. Lucy listened attentively.

'Oh, that is sweet!' she said at the end. 'Do say some more.'

George said some more—inwardly thinking Lucy the nicest girl he had ever met.

They were still sitting together when Mrs. Mellon returned from her meeting. The little woman seemed depressed. She flung the coal-scuttle bonnet into one chair and herself into another, and sighed deeply several times.

‘What’s the matter, ma?’ asked Lucy.

‘Nothing!’ answered her mother snappishly, with a fretful movement of her shoulders. No one spoke for a while, and presently Mrs. Mellon burst out,

‘This Mrs. Robinson—she is detestable, horrible, false!’

‘Mrs. Robinson, ma?’ repeated Lucy.

‘Yes, Mrs. Robinson. Figure to yourself, Lucie, there was this woman at the meeting, with a new cloak with A. L. embroidered in red on the arm. You know what a creature she is—how she is lazy, good for nothing! Only this morning I

brought her little Tommy in here and scrubbed his face because it was so black—and this woman—there she is! She got up and said her experiences—she pretends she has been called! She said that in the middle of last night she heard a voice saying, “Sarah! repent of thy sins, and give thy money to the Army of the Lord!” She said she hadn’t got any money, but she repented of all her sins, and that she felt she was saved, and that her soul was clean and white. I nearly called out to her, “Nevair mind your soul, make first your children clean.” Did you ever hear such nonsense? And they made such a fuss about her! As if she was a princess! I am quite disgusted with these people. I think they are hombogs.’

‘I always did think so, ma!’ said Lucy.

‘Has Mr. Jarvis come in?’

‘No, he said he was going to be very late, and wouldn’t want anything to eat. He’s got his latchkey.’

‘Then come, my children, let us go to bed. I am very tired.’

So was George: he took the candle Lucy gave him, and after wishing his landlady and her daughter good-night, went off to dream that he had attained to wealth and fame and everything else that his ambitious heart desired.





CHAPTER VI

A HEAVY FATHER

SAFE in his little room, George, forgetting that he had still to unpack and arrange his things, sat down on the edge of his bed, and in a few moments became blind and deaf so far as all outward things were concerned.

Strangely enough, the events of the day—his departure from home, his journey, his installation in Hypatia Street—seemed to have faded away, to have become but a vague memory, while vividly present to his

mind was the image of his childhood and early boyhood. He had rehearsed so often to himself the story which he had just told Lucy Mellon that he had finished by half believing it, and had got to the point of actually pitying himself for his imaginary sufferings.

And yet his real sufferings had been bad enough. From whom had George Collins, son of the utterly commonplace, vulgar, and illiterate George and Susan Collins of the Bell and Boot, inherited the peculiar disposition which had rendered his life under its natural circumstances a torment to him ever since he could remember ?

His parents could barely read and write, and considered those accomplishments rather a waste of time. They had got 'brass' without them ; and as that metal represented the one aim and object

of their lives, they would have been perfectly content to see their only child follow in their footsteps.

What was it then that impelled the boy to hoard and treasure every scrap of paper with 'printin'' on it, to cry to be allowed to go to school when other children were always playing truant, to spend his pence on books rather than on lollipops and whipping-tops or marbles? Why did he go about with his head bent, starting when spoken to, and looking up with dreamy, non-understanding eyes, almost as if he were a 'softy,' instead of a sensible Christian? Why did he make such a point of washing himself, and turn up his nose if there happened to be a few more stains than usual on the tablecloth? And why must he try to mince and mouth like a southern cockney, so

that a decent body could hardly understand him?

He had been a very thorn in the flesh to his parents, and it would be hard to say which suffered most, the old people, who saw that by some strange chance or other they had brought forth a being with whom they had not, and never could have, one solitary fibre of sympathy, or the lonely boy, who found himself, as it were, in a country of which he knew not the language—a civilised creature among barbarous natives—who, by some unkind freak of nature, while passionately longing for culture and refinement, was compelled to live in the midst of surroundings which filled his whole soul with disgust.

He had often looked with eyes of envy at the bookfilled satchels of gentlemen's sons on their way to and from school.

Though it tortured him to hear the difference between their refined accent and that which he knew to be his own, he could not help following them as they walked along by twos and threes from school to their homes. What homes they lived in! Substantial houses whose every window seemed to twinkle with a glow of comfort and wealth, from whose casements could be seen glimpses of softly coloured lamps, beautiful pictures, shining silver, richly tinted draperies, rows upon rows of books. Those happy schoolboys, George thought, ought every one to become a celebrated man, they had so much in their favour. It would be so easy to fill one's self with knowledge under such blissful circumstances, where nothing jarred, where all was harmony and peace!

And *his* home! The Bell and Boot!

No galley-slave ever felt his chains more galling, no convict ever sickened more over the dull monotony of his daily task, no prisoner ever chafed more bitterly at the narrow limits of his confining walls, than did George Collins, only son and heir of that agreeable hostelry, which had quite an extensive reputation as a putting-up place for small bagmen, as well as for a snug chimney-corner, and a glass of as good ale as was to be got anywhere.

When George was twelve his running away had been almost the one subject of his thoughts; when he was twenty-six he was thinking about it still. And yet all through those long years he had never ceased to look forward to his ultimate escape as a certainty that time would bring him. If he had had either a solid education or money enough to keep body and

soul together, he would have gone long before ; but he had quite sufficient sense to feel that although he had managed, by dint of reading, attending lectures, concerts, and keeping his eyes and ears open, to pick up a large and varied amount of information, still what he knew was not what would prevent him from starving out in the world, and even the bread and beer of the Bell and Boot, low and degraded bread and beer though it undoubtedly was, had much the same effect on the human system as the more refined nourishment of a higher sphere. Work with his hands he would not—so lofty a spirit could not stoop to manual labour—so, half-ashamed of his want of energy, half-applauding himself as a martyr, he let the years slip away, looked down upon by his parents as a poor half-witted creature, admired by the

clients of the public-house as a poet and a dreamer of dreams; living a kind of double life; and enabled by the unreal existence to bear the uncongenialities and humiliations of the real.

And now at last he had actually taken the step--had cast himself loose from the leading strings which had so long held him back! As he sat on the bed in the narrow little room in Hypatia Street, and felt himself a free man, a smile of contempt for his own lack of courage crossed his features. How was it he had only lately thought of going on the stage? what a fool he had been not to do it long before! Fame, independence, fortune, had been lying at his feet all these years, and he, like an idiot, had been staring up into the blue sky, and rhyming his dove and love, and sing and wing, and all the rest of it!

Oh well, it was not too late, he had the world before him; and with this pleasant and encouraging reflection Mr. George L'Estrange rapidly undressed, got into bed, and fell asleep.

He must have been asleep some hours when he began to dream that some one was standing over him, hitting his head rather hard with a wooden mallet. His natural indignation at so unkind a proceeding causing him to awake, he discovered that some one was really hammering, not his head, but the door of his room. He sat up and was just going to say 'Come in,' when he heard a voice which he immediately recognised as Lucy Mellon's, although it bore a very different tone from that in which she had wished him 'Good-night' that evening.

‘Come away, pa,’ it said, ‘come to your room quietly, do. You’ll wake him.’

‘But that’s jus’ what I want do,’ answered another voice, which George instantly attributed to a man who had had more to drink than was good for him. ‘Thash jus’ what I want do. Mush welcome ’im! very rude to go’er bed and not welcome new guesht!’

Lucy’s voice murmured something, of which only the word ‘to-morrow’ was distinguishable, but the other voice insisted with a tipsy gravity only too familiar to George,

‘No, not ’morrer. Now. Whash that ’bout speed er partin’ guesht? Greet a comin’ guesht—same thing. Lemme do ’s I like. Lemme ’lone, do ye ’ear?’

With this the knocking or rather

bumping against the door began again, to an accompaniment of 'Mishter—mishter what's er name. I shay, mishter. Lemme be, will yer? Mishter!'

At this point, while George was wondering whether it would be better for him to go on pretending he did not hear, or put on some things and go out and help Lucy to get her drunken father to bed, the front door opened and shut, and he heard Lucy say, with evident relief,

'Oh, is that you, Mr. Jarvis? I'm so glad! Do come and persuade pa to go to bed. We've got a new lodger, and pa will insist on waking him up.'

There was another bump, as if a body had fallen against the wall, and the second voice said,

'Ullo, Jarvis, me boy, 'ow are you? Very glad to shee you. Jush talk to Lucy

here, she's tryin' to make a fool of me.'

'Come with me, will you, Mr. Mellon?' said a third voice. 'You go to bed, Miss Lucy, and leave him to me. I'll see to him.'

There was a 'thank you,' and Lucy's room door shut.

'Now then, old man,' said the new-comer persuasively, 'hurry. You'll catch your death of cold out here.'

'So I shall, so I shall,' answered the drunken voice with a sudden maudlin break in it. 'Lucy never said that. Its 'ard, Jarvis, damned 'ard for a feller to 'ave an unnatural shild like that.'

A sob or two and a snuffle followed.

'Come along, Mr. Mellon, it's very late,' said Mr. Jarvis's voice.

'Jarvis—don' 'urry me! You're a good

feller, Jarvis, I always say so, when the Missis——'

'Oh, come along, do!' said the other impatiently.

'I'm comin' 's fast 's possible,' responded Mr. Mellon with dignity; 'there's no hurry. You don' wanter catch a train, do you, Jarvis?'

'Come on,' from Jarvis.

'No, but do you? Tell us, Jarvey, do you wanter—do you wanter—here, what are you shovin' for?'

'That's not your door.'

'Ah, no more it ish—sho many doors in this place, a feller can't shee 'em all at once.'

Another door opened and shut; a pause ensued, during which a running growl, sometimes rising to a higher key, was plainly audible, then with a parting good-

night, Mr. Jarvis ran downstairs and went into his own room, and George, almost feeling as if he were back at the Bell and Boot, turned on his side and fell asleep again.





CHAPTER VII

MAKING FRIENDS

WHEN he woke the next morning the sun was shining brightly into his room, and he sprang out of bed, feeling that to-day his life was to begin in earnest. With this sensation uppermost in his mind, he dressed and washed in quite a belligerent way, with his mouth firmly set, and his eyes fixed and stern. When he came to shave himself he looked at the familiar face in the tarnished looking-glass with a new interest, and paused

for a moment, shaving brush in hand, while he examined his features as if they belonged to some one else. He decided that the determined look became him best, and congratulated himself on not wearing a beard, as in that case so much of his mouth and chin would have been lost. He looked doubtfully at his golden-brown whiskers, and for one instant debated the advisability of shaving them, but only for one instant—the next he was stroking them fondly and reflecting that it would be time enough to sacrifice them when he had got an engagement which would necessitate a cleanly-shaven face.

‘Well, George, my boy!’ he said, giving himself a friendly nod when he was ready to go downstairs, ‘you have got it all before you. You were born to be somebody—and somebody you shall be. Go

in and win — that's what you've got to do !'

He made his way down to the general sitting-room, where he found his little landlady bustling about among cups and saucers, and Lucy already hard at work at her own table.

'Why, here's Mr. L'Estrange !' she said, giving him a cheerful nod. 'He's an early riser, ain't he, ma ?'

'I'm used to country hours, you know,' said George ; 'but you're early yourselves.'

'Oh yes ! Ma and me's always down early. We can't afford to lay in bed, can we, ma ?'

'No, my dear,' said Mrs. Mellon absently, as she put a dish of very curious London-looking butter on the table.

'Did you sleep well, Mr. L'Estrange ?' asked Lucy, her head bent over her work.

‘Capitally, thank you.’

‘You—were not disturbed at all?’

‘Oh no, I had a beautiful night,’ answered George, as boldly as Jack the Giant-killer answered the ogre after the latter had been pounding his bed with a club all night.

Lucy looked up at him, but George met her eye with the most innocent face in the world.

Just then a short, slight, sandy-haired man entered the room, and cast a sharp glance at George and Lucy as he stood for a moment on the threshold.

‘Oh, here’s Mr. Jarvis,’ said Lucy. ‘Mr. Jarvis, this is our new lodger, Mr. L’Estrange.’

‘How are you, sir?’ said George so heartily that Mr. Jarvis relaxed an almost abnormal severity of countenance, and went

so far as to shake hands. A very limp hand it was that he gave George, and he winced at the other's strong grip, and rubbed his fingers furtively from time to time during breakfast.

'You are—a stranger to London?' he asked politely, in a little prim way which suited well with his neat little clothes, his small boots, his narrow though spotless cuffs, his dry and scanty hair, his pale blue eyes and smooth colourless cheeks. Lucy looked at the two as they stood side by side on the hearthrug, and made mental comparisons in favour of George. George noted her glance, and, with the intuitive understanding of other people which he possessed in so eminent a degree, followed her thoughts as if she had spoken them. He looked complacently at the small figure beside him as he answered,

‘Ay, mister. I came down from Manchester yesterday. I’ve come, like poor Dick Whittington of old, to seek my fortune.’

‘In the city?’ asked Mr. Jarvis.

‘In the city? No, sir,’ said George with a short laugh. ‘My ambition was never set upon being Lord Mayor.’

‘Then——’ began Mr. Jarvis.

‘Mr. L’Estrange is going to be an actor,’ put in Lucy sharply.

Mr. Jarvis’s pale-lipped mouth contracted in an ‘Oh!’

‘Yes,’ said George, drawing himself up. ‘The stage it is. I’ve all my life longed to be an actor, and now I’m going to be one in real earnest.’

‘H’m!’ said Mr. Jarvis reflectively. ‘Your accent will be rather in your way, won’t it?’

Lucy looked daggers at the rash speaker. George reddened up to the roots of his hair. Mr. Jarvis had hit him in a weak place.

‘Ay, I suppose I do speak broad,’ he said, swallowing his mortification, ‘but that can be conquered. And I shall be very much obliged if any one will take the trouble to correct me now and then.’

‘Delighted, I’m sure,’ murmured Mr. Jarvis, pleased at having established his superiority over the stranger, and glancing triumphantly towards Lucy, who said staunchly,

‘Nonsense, Mr. L’Estrange, it’s us as can learn from you, I’m sure. A gentleman that writes poetry and all! There’s no call for you to speak like that.’

Mr. Jarvis clouded over again, and addressed himself to his bloater and bread and butter with great ferocity.

Edward Jarvis was a solicitor's clerk of indifferent fortune and indifferent brains. He had been for fifteen years in the employ of one firm, beginning as office boy and gradually creeping upwards to the position he now held. Although not brilliant, his employers esteemed him on account of his steadiness and trustworthiness, and would as soon have thought of parting with their office table as with 'Old Jarvis.'

Jarvis had met Lucy Mellon two or three years ago at a mutual friend's house, had fallen straightway in love with her, and had come to lodge in Hypatia Street solely to be near his idol. He proposed to her about once in every six months, and although grieved by her invariably negative answer, was by no means discouraged, and at the end of the next six months was quite ready for a fresh rebuff. In his heart of hearts

he believed that it was only a question of time, and that Lucy would some day say 'Yes,' instead of the 'No,' which had crossed her lips so often.

At first Lucy had found it rather awkward to have a rejected lover in the house, even one who paid so promptly, and who never grumbled at 'extras'; but after a while she grew used to Mr. Jarvis and his ways, took no more notice of him when it so pleased her than if he had been a kitten, made use of him to take her to concerts and the theatre, and entertained that half-contemptuous feeling of liking for him which most women have for a too fond and humble lover.

Mr. Jarvis had had Lucy to himself for so long that it was a great blow to him to find a handsome, young, and interesting stranger installed in the house; and his

faithful little heart was very full as he imbibed the coffee for which Mrs. Mellon was justly famous, and noted Lucy's smiles and George's attentive ways. He saw that Lucy had done up her hair in the elaborate manner usually kept for company or going out, that she had put on one of her best collars, and that she wore her afternoon apron. All this boded ill for him, he knew, and he cursed his shortsightedness in not having taken the empty room upstairs, so as to make sure that no other lodger could come to encroach on his ground.

Mrs. Mellon was in a wonderful morning costume, of which the only possible description is that it was very loose and baggy and extremely short. Her head was adorned with a black net cap, full of bows, which caused it to look too large for her body, and gave to her small figure a most

grotesque appearance. She appeared entirely taken up with her household duties, which must have been of an onerous nature, judging from the melancholy expression of her features. She only answered in monosyllables the remarks which George thought it polite to make to her, and poured out the coffee with sighs so deep as to be almost groans. Her own breakfast consisted of one small strip of bread, and when she had finished that she got up and went away.

‘Don’t take any notice of ma,’ observed Lucy, noticing that George’s eyes followed her mother to the door. ‘She’s always so in the morning. She feels things then. She don’t cheer up till after dinner-time.’

‘Puts off her troubles with her morning-cap, don’t she, Miss Lucy?’ said Mr. Jarvis facetiously.

‘You seem to know all about it,’ an-

swered Lucy coldly, getting up and going back to her table.

Mr. Jarvis, feeling himself snubbed, said no more, but finished his sixth slice of bread and butter, and then reluctantly left his rival and Lucy to themselves. They heard the front door slam behind him, and his neat little feet tripping down the baronial flight of steps.

‘Has he been with you long?’ inquired George.

‘Three years. He’s a rather stupid fellow—but very good meaning and quiet,’ said Lucy.

At this point Mrs. Mellon came into the room, and began to clear away the breakfast things in the quick, deft way which characterised all her movements.

George was wondering whether Mr. Mellon was in the habit of going without

breakfast, when a sober edition of the voice he had heard in the night shouted down the stairs,

‘ Here, I say ! Lucy, Marie ’—pronounced Marry—‘ bring me some soda water.’

Mrs. Mellon took not the slightest notice of the request, which was repeated once or twice before Lucy stuck her needle in her work and went out of the room.

George whistled a tune softly : Mrs. Mellon folded up the table-cloth, smoothed it carefully, and taking up her tray went into the kitchen.

It was not long before Lucy came back. She sat down and drew her work towards her impatiently. Her expression had become gloomy, George noticed, as he stood looking at her from his place of vantage on the hearthrug.

‘ Ne’er do weel, drunken father, I

suppose,' he thought. 'How she must hate him !'

'Well, Miss Lucy,' he said aloud, 'I suppose I must be off—to try my fortune.'

Lucy looked up brightly.

'Where do you think of going to first, Mr. L'Estrange?' she asked.

George rubbed his forehead meditatively.

'Well—there are my poems and myself to be disposed of. My poems will keep, won't they? They'll manage that business all by themselves; but the keeping of myself is a more difficult business, so perhaps I'd better begin with that. It's awfully kind of you to let me talk to you, and worry you with my affairs,' he added. 'I didn't expect to find such a good friend in London. Do you know, Miss Lucy, you are almost the first person I ever met that seemed to take a real interest in me? I

have been so friendless, so lonely all my life !’

‘Oh, Mr. L’Estrange !’ said Lucy blushing. ‘It’s a pleasure to me to think you should like to talk to me. I—I—have never had many friends either,’ she faltered. ‘I’ve always kept a good deal to myself.’

‘Then shall we make a bargain, Miss Lucy ?’ George said earnestly ; ‘shall we agree to be real friends, you and I ? To have no secrets from one another, but to trust and help each other all we can ? Shall we ?’

‘Oh yes, Mr. L’Estrange !’ said Lucy warmly, holding out her hand to meet the one George had extended towards her. ‘That *will* be nice, won’t it ?’

‘Hallo ! what’s going on here ?’ said a thick voice, and a tall stout man came heavily into the room. Before he had

advanced many steps George had recognised his fellow-traveller of the day before. He threw himself into an armchair and looked at George with a grin.

‘So you got here all right! Good dodge o’ mine, wasn’t it?’

‘It’s my father,’ said Lucy, answering George’s perplexed look.

‘Oh, so that’s why the voice seemed familiar last—just now,’ said George, catching himself up in time. ‘How d’ye do, sir?’

‘I’m bobbish enough,’ answered Mr. Mellon with a thick laugh; ‘the question is, how’s yourself, and what do you think of my recommendation, eh?’

‘I’m very much obliged to you for it, sir,’ answered George heartily. ‘You couldn’t have sent me to better quarters, I’m sure.’

‘Ha, ha! It was a good joke, wasn’t it?’

said Mr. Mellon, with a long, unctuous chuckle.

‘Will you have some breakfast, father?’ asked Lucy.

Mr. Mellon finished his chuckle before he answered gruffly, ‘What is there? Nothing a man can eat, I suppose, if your mother’s had the providin’ of it.’

‘There’s a bloater,’ said Lucy.

‘Bloater, eh? Why couldn’t it have been a kipper? All right, let’s have it, and plenty of pepper, mind,’ he called, as Lucy shut the door behind her.

‘An’ so you think you’ll be all right here, do you?’ he asked, after looking George all over.

‘I think so, if you’ll all keep me,’ answered George mildly, reflecting that Mr. Mellon was decidedly the least prepossessing of the family.

‘If we’ll keep you, eh? No, by Jove, we expect you to do that for yourself!’ cried Mr. Mellon, with a laugh at his own wit. ‘Well, I don’t see why you shouldn’t make yourself comferable—com-fort-able—here, only I’ll just give you a straight tip, and no mistake about it. You just make up to the missis. Get on her soft side, and you’ll do. She can make it damned uncomfortable for a man, I can tell you, if she don’t like him; for she does all the cooking, and she’s as spiteful as old Harry himself, thinks nothing of puttin’ a spoonful of cayenne into his food if she ain’t pleased with ’im, or choosin’ ’im out a real French egg. So you look after what I tell you, and mind what you’re about with her, and then you’ll be all right.’

‘Lucy’s a good girl,’ he continued after a pause, rolling his small bloodshot

eyes back towards the door, 'she's a very good girl—and pretty, too. But she's 'ard, as 'ard as her mother—all women are 'ard—and devilish critical, ain't they?'

George was relieved from the trouble of answering by Lucy's appearance with her father's breakfast at this moment. She laid the tray before him and poured him out a cup of coffee.

'Stale coffee? eh?' queried Mr. Mellon.

'It's some of what we had at breakfast,' returned Lucy, settling herself to her work again.

'Of course! Can't even have a cup of fresh coffee in my own house. I suppose old Stingy wouldn't let you have any, eh?'

'Are you going out soon, Mr. L'Estrange?' asked Lucy, taking no notice of the last remark.

'Ha! tryin' to turn him out now, so as

he mayn't be corrupted by your wicked father! Oh, go on, go on, my girl, some day I shall make an 'ole in the canal, and be brought home to you a moulderin' corpse, and then you and your mother 'll be sorry!'

'No such luck for us! I wish there was!'

here exclaimed Mrs. Mellon, suddenly darting round the door. 'It is not never such men as you as come to any harm. You live to tor—r—r—ment us!'

'Don't argue with him, ma, you know it's no use doing that,' put in Lucy, with a distressed look at George, who, feeling particularly awkward in the midst of this family dispute, would have slipped away, but that the doorway was blocked by his little landlady, who was too excited to move aside for him.

'To call me such names — and before a

stranger too !' she cried, brandishing her cap at him with a fierce shake of her head.

'What names, my dear? I'm sure I never did,' said Mr. Mellon meekly, looking disconsolately at his bloater.

'Oh, of cour-r-se not !' returned his wife sarcastically. 'And who, pray then, is old Stingy? and who is as spiteful as old Harry? and who puts too much cayenne into your food? and who—bah, I am sick, tired, ashamed of you !' and with a bang of the door the lady vanished as suddenly as she had come.

'Well, upon my word !' said Mr. Mellon, holding up his knife and fork in his trembling, swollen red hands, 'if ever I saw such a termagant ! Lucy, my dear, it's unbearable. Your poor father can stand life no longer—if it were not for your feelings I'd cut my throat this very minute.'

And he gave such a realistic thrust with his knife towards his neck that George involuntarily made a step forward in alarm, but the knife fell harmlessly, and Lucy said in a bitingly sarcastic tone,

‘Oh, don’t disturb yourself, Mr. L’Estrange, pa’s not going to do anything of the sort.’

Here Mr. Mellon rested his elbow on the table and covered his eyes with his hand.

‘Have you finished, pa?’ asked his daughter coldly; ‘because, if you have, I’ll take away the tray.’

Mr. Mellon pushed the tray from him with his other hand.

‘Take it — take it!’ he exclaimed huskily; ‘what does it matter? ’Arried, worried, half-starved in my own house — nothing matters any more to me.’

Lucy got up and took away the tray.

As soon as she had gone Mr. Mellon's manner changed. Taking out a well-stored cigar-case, he offered it to George, saying with a laugh,

'Help yourself, old fellah. They cost me nothing! I can have as many as I like at any time.'

George took one and lighted it, observing at the same time that he must be going out.

Mr. Mellon inquired his destination, whereupon George, repeating that he wished to go on the stage, asked his advice as to the best way to set about it.

'Can you sing?' asked his landlord.

'Yes, but I don't want to sing.'

'Never mind what you want. You take my advice, and go in for that line. It ain't half such 'ard work, and much

better fun than the other, which is slow and dull, and don't pay as well.'

'Do you happen to know any of the theatrical managers?' asked George, not thinking it worth while to discuss the respective merits of the legitimate drama and the music-hall stage.

'Know any of the managers? Should think I did! Know 'em all! Old Irving and all the rest of 'em—of course.'

'Could you give me an introduction to any one of them?' hazarded George.

Mr. Mellon looked grave.

'Well now—I'll tell you what. It's a rule of mine never to give an introduction of that sort to any one. I did it once too often, and got took in so tremenjously that I vowed I never would again, not even if it was for my own brother. But I'll tell you what I *will* do,' he added. 'I'll

give you a note to a great friend of mine—
'Oward 'Arvey. He's leader of the orchestra
at the Casino, 'Olborn, and *he* might be
able to give you a boost up, d'ye see?'

'Thanks very much,' said George,
doubtfully.

'I'll write it for you to-morrow. You
take my advice, and go and get acquainted
a bit with the town first—know your way
about before you start on anything.'

'Thanks,' again said George, making his
way to the door, 'I'll remember what you
say.'

'Oh, I say, look 'ere,' observed Mr.
Mellon, as George took hold of the handle ;
'wait a second.'

He put his hand in his pocket as he
spoke, and George was already anticipating
the request of a small loan, when his land-
lord drew forth half-a-crown, which he laid

in the middle of a fat red palm and held out to George.

‘There, my boy. Do me the *honour* to borrow that from me. Bless you, I was young and hard-up myself once.’

‘But I’ve got enough, I assure you,’ said George.

‘Never mind, never mind, borrow it—in case of a rainy day. Come, I’ll be offended if you don’t. You can give it back any day you like.’

‘But——’ began George, half-vexed, half-laughing.

‘No buts — take it, man, or ’Enry Mellon is no friend of yours.’

‘Very well, then,’ said George, ‘to please you. It’s very good of you, sir, and I won’t forget it. But you must let me give it back soon.’

‘When you like, my boy, when you

like,' said the other with a wink of his bleared eye. 'And when you get rich and famous you can adopt me as a son.'

George was going up the steep little flight of stairs to the hall when a choked voice said 'Mr. L'Estrange,' and following its direction he came upon Mrs. Mellon sitting huddled up on a wooden case in a very minute and clean kitchen. The poor thing had her apron up to her eyes, and was sobbing convulsively.

'Did you call me, ma'am?' asked George.

Mrs. Mellon sobbed all the louder.

'Are you going to your room to pack up?' she gasped.

'To pack up?' repeated George in surprise. 'Why no, ma'am. Do you wish me gone already?'

'No, no, I wish it not. But the others,

they have all gone—one after the other. I had lately such a respectable, honourable widow-lady, who paid me so well, and gave no trouble—and what does he do, my wicked bad husband? He takes her one evening, when Lucie and I are gone out, to the Star, his hall you know, and shocks her most fearful; and then, one other night, he sings “Oh come out, Fairy darling!” outside her bedroom door, and scandalise her so that next day she went. And she was not the first, so I thought you’were perhaps going too.’

‘No, no, I’m not a respectable widow-lady,’ said George laughing. ‘Come, cheer up, Mrs. Mellon. This isn’t the first time I’ve seen a man like that. Why, up North we’re always doing it, you know.’

‘Is it so?’ asked Mrs. Mellon, wiping her tear-bedabbled little face, and beginning

to look more hopeful. 'And you will not take any notice? You know—he is always so—now—only except when he is worse!'

'That's all right,' said George cheerfully. 'And now I'm going to make my first expedition into London Town.'

'Dinner will be ready at two,' said Mrs. Mellon timidly.

'You'd better not expect me,' returned George. 'You see, I don't know my way about, so that I can't promise to be back in time.'

He ran upstairs, and Mrs. Mellon dried her tears, inwardly vowing that he should have something with his tea, both to make up for the loss of his dinner and to reward him for the comfort he had given her.



CHAPTER VIII

A BOLD VENTURE

GEORGE walked away down Hypatia Street, pondering over the strange household into which he had fallen.

‘I wonder,’ thought he, ‘whether Fate has intended that pretty Lucy to be my wife. Very likely. I daresay she would suit me all right. Not very intellectual or well-educated perhaps, but a thrifty, shrewd manager, and all that. What pretty hair she’s got, and how becomingly she arranges it. I could do

with a more amiable father-in-law, though. *He* wouldn't be much to boast of. Pleasant little weakness of his, all the same, to insist upon lending one half-crowns without even being asked for them. I wonder what he did that for? I'll be bound he's not the sort of chap to cast his bread upon such very troubled waters as a lodger's memory without some motive. I suppose I shall find it out, sooner or later. How that poor little delicate Frenchwoman must hate her great hulking brute of a husband! The way she looked up at me just now was quite pathetic — she must have been pretty in her young days.

'Well—here I am, at the bottom of Hypatia Street. Where shall I go? So many places I want to see — the pictures, and museums, and Madame Tussaud's, and Regent Street, and the Park, and — here

comes an omnibus. I'll get on it and go wherever it chooses to take me.'

He climbed to the box-seat of the vehicle, and was soon being transported westwards, improving the occasion, as was his wont, by extracting as much information as possible from the driver, to conciliate whom he began by admiring the style in which he drove.

When he got off at Oxford Circus he was a good deal the wiser for his drive. He sauntered slowly down Regent Street, taking in men and things with that wonderful receptiveness which contributed so much to his success in after life. Nothing escaped him, he understood at a glance what other people would never notice at all; every detail had its significance for him. His walk was like a sort of epic, in which he was the wandering hero, around whose footsteps objects animate and inani-

mate grouped themselves, each and all telling him their story, some showing him a little drama perfect in itself, others hinting at a tragedy past or future, some exhibiting the proud imprint of success, some others again bearing the marks of decent poverty or ruin. He walked on as if in a dream, and yet he had never in his life been so keenly alive, so widely awake both to himself and to his surroundings. He looked at the shops with their costly articles, he noted the perfectly appointed carriages setting down their fair burdens, he felt the breath of careless opulence pass close to him, and he clenched his teeth as he said to himself, 'All this is to be had—and I *will* have it.'

He lingered beneath the lofty portico of the Haymarket Theatre, and examined the bills which announced a genteel teacup-and-saucer comedy which some fashionable play-

wright had been so good as to adapt from the French and call original.

Wakefield Todd was the manager's name, a name familiar enough to George, who had often seen him act in Manchester, and who had heard that he had taken this theatre with hardly any money at his back, and by sheer pluck and industry had made a success of his venture.

'He had to begin himself once,' thought George. 'I wonder if he would have anything to say to me.'

The box-office was open, to allow people to book for the morning performance, and almost without thinking George followed a stout old gentleman up the steps. He waited until the old gentleman had got two stalls, and then went up to the office, with his heart beginning to beat perceptibly faster.

‘What for you, sir?’ asked the official, looking up from a pile of change he was sorting.

‘Could I see Mr. Wakefield Todd?’ inquired George.

‘Got an appointment?’ asked the box-keeper, leaning against the desk, and reckoning up the young man from the country who wanted to go on the stage as easily as he had done his shillings and half-crowns a moment before.

‘No,’ said George, ‘but I wanted——’

‘You must write and make one then,’ said the clerk briskly; ‘Mr. Todd’s time is all taken beforehand.’

‘Oh — thank you!’ answered George, and in another minute was in the street again, deaf and blind for once to all around him.

‘My first trial — and a failure!’ he

thought. 'Oh well, it would be utterly absurd to expect to succeed like that.'

He recovered his equanimity after a while, and wandered on until he came to the Strand, which he knew very well by hearsay. Here he recognised in the cleanly-shaven, erect men, of whom he passed so many, the already chosen votaries of the art whose servant he so longed to become. Sandwich-men with announcements of new pieces were perseveringly parading the gutters, at every few steps he saw another theatre with its great dully-shining glass letters, so brilliant at night; theatrical life was in the air, and George's heart began to beat fast again, as he realised that here was his goal, that in this crowded dingy street lay his El Dorado, that he had only to distinguish himself among this jostling mass of his fellow-creatures, to

show himself a better man than they, and that then the glittering gifts of Art, Fame, and Fortune would lie at his feet.

‘Only that—and nothing more!’ he muttered. ‘It doesn’t sound so hard. It’s the chance that’s difficult to get.’

He decided that he would fortify his inner man before presenting himself anywhere else, and for this purpose turned into the first restaurant he came to, seated himself at a small table, and ordered a chop and a pint of bitter. Chance had led him to a good place. Fortuny’s restaurant is a favourite haunt of those who know a good dinner when they see one. It was early yet, and the room was almost empty, but everything was well-ordered and clean, and the waiters spruce and smart.

At the table opposite George’s sat a man who had come in at the same time as

himself, and who had taken up a newspaper while waiting for his luncheon. George's observant eyes soon fell on him, and he quickly decided that his neighbour was an actor. He was thirty or a little more, with a perfectly smooth face, and black hair cut particularly short. His features were remarkably good, the nose forming an almost Greek line with the low broad forehead. The mouth was thin-lipped, but beautifully shaped, the chin square and determined, the dark eyes peculiarly bright and piercing. He probably felt George's gaze fixed upon him, for without moving his position, or lowering his newspaper, he raised his eyes and returned the other's scrutiny coolly and deliberately, but with perfect indifference, dropping them after he had satisfied himself, and going on with his leading article as before.

Something in this man's appearance fascinated George, who was always impressionable enough.

‘He looks as if the whole world belonged to him,’ thought he, ‘and devilish clever besides. I suppose it isn’t the thing to speak to a stranger, and yet I should tremendously like to. And, by Jove, I will too—at the worst I can but get a snubbing.’

The tables were only just wide enough apart for the waiter to pass between them, there was therefore no need for George to raise his voice as he inquired,

‘Any news to-day, sir?’

The other looked up, and ceremoniously handed his newspaper across to George.

‘Oh no, I didn’t mean to take your paper from you,’ said the young man, confused, ‘I only wanted to——’

At this moment the waiter, much to George's relief, came up with his chop.

The other man also had a chop, and although he looked very grim as he sat eating it, George resolved not to be beaten so easily, took heart of grace, and began again.

‘Are there any good pieces running just now?’ he inquired.

‘About the same as usual,’ answered the other in a matter-of-fact tone; and George, inwardly congratulating himself on having made a beginning, went on,

‘I’ve just come down from the North, and am a stranger here.’

‘So I surmised,’ observed the other, helping himself to a potato. George, determined not to take anything but a very decided snub, said,

‘Yes, my accent bewrayeth me, I know.

I'm afraid that same accent will get in my way a good bit.'

'Indeed?' quoth the other, fixing his eyes on the ceiling.

'Ay! I want to go on the stage,' said George, getting rather hot.

The bright black eyes came down from the ceiling, looked at George with an amused air, and their owner remarked, 'Do you?'

'Yes—but I'm a stranger.'

'So you observed before,' said the other with the beginning of a smile.

'He's thinking me an awful fool,' thought George, 'and no wonder! But I don't care. It's that or nothing.'

'I suppose you're expecting me to tell you that I've a bag with a hundred pounds in it in my pocket,' he said smiling, 'which, to show my confidence in you, I'll leave in

your custody while I go outside to tie up my shoe.'

The other laughed outright this time, showing a very perfect set of white teeth.

'Well, you know,' he said rather more genially, 'when a young man keeps on telling you that he's a stranger, you're apt to suspect——'

'That he was born within the sound of Bow Bells—exactly,' said George.

They both laughed, and when two men have laughed at the same joke together, the ice between them is distinctly broken.

'I really am—a real bona-fide stranger, though,' said George, 'and if I may make so bold—you are an actor?'

The other nodded.

'I thought as much when I spoke to you,' said George earnestly, his north-country accent getting stronger as he grew

excited, 'and that's why I did speak. I thought may be you'd not think me impertinent or forward if I ventured to ask a bit of advice. I told you I wanted to go on the stage—and how I am to set about it, that's what I want to know.'

The other took a good long look at this queer young countryman, whose odd persistence and earnestness interested him in spite of himself.

'What in Heaven's name makes you think of the stage?' he queried.

'Well—many things,' returned George. 'To begin with, I feel I have it in me.'

'Oh, of course I know that, every one always does,' said the other carelessly; 'is there no better reason?'

George hesitated. 'I don't know what else to do.'

'That's better. Hard up, I suppose?'

George nodded.

‘But your accent?’

‘I shall get rid of that.’

‘Will you? Have you ever tried to act?’

George shook his head.

‘Oh well, that’s a mercy! I hate your accomplished amateur, who knows all about everything because he’s acted once or twice in his aunt’s back drawing-room, with the bedroom candlesticks for footlights and a counterpane for a background. Still—you’re—how old?’

‘Twenty-eight,’ replied George.

‘Old enough to know better! And have you never done anything for a living yet?’ asked the actor, with a keen look at the young man’s hands.

George coloured. ‘I—I—have written a few things.’

‘Ha! Poems, I’ll bet a shilling!’ exclaimed the actor.

‘Yes,’ faltered George, feeling about two years old.

‘Printed?’ inquired the other.

‘N—no, not yet.’

‘Not yet, of course not.’

The actor smiled to himself, and went on with his chop, which he finished before he spoke again. Then rising and buttoning up his coat, he looked at George’s plate.

‘Feeling too queer to eat, eh?’ he said, not unkindly. ‘Look here, my boy. I’m afraid you’ve got a hard time before you, but I like the look of you, somehow, and I’ll do what I can for you.’

George got up, and grasped the other’s hand with tears in his eyes. ‘God bless you!’ he said very low, ‘I was right to speak to you.’

‘Softly, softly—don’t make a scene, for Heaven’s sake,’ said the actor dryly, withdrawing his hand. ‘I’ve got a morning performance at the Parthenon, and must be off now; but look here, here’s my card,’ tossing one on the table, ‘that will admit you to the theatre, come and see the piece, and wait for me afterwards.’

Before George could thank him again he was gone, the waiter who had served him flying to the door and bowing obsequiously as he passed out.

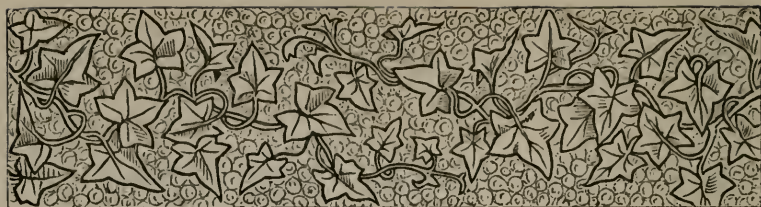
George cast his eyes on the card, and was dumfounded.

‘Vernon himself! By Jove!’ he exclaimed, ‘Well, I *am* in luck’s way. I must have been born with a silver spoon in my mouth. What an omen! But I should never have had the cheek to speak to him if I’d known who he was.’

Elate and hopeful, he finished his luncheon and then walked slowly out, feeling a different man from the one who had been turned away an hour ago from the Haymarket box-office.

‘Perhaps I’ve got my chance,’ he thought, as he went up the steps of the Parthenon, where Mr. Vernon was acting, and confidently presented the actor’s card ; ‘perhaps I’ve got my chance—and it sha’n’t be my fault if I don’t make the most of it!’





CHAPTER IX

PAVING THE WAY

THE piece in which Mr. Vernon was playing was one of those extravagant melodramas which are at once vulgar and witty, absurd in their impossibilities, and interesting from the cleverness of their construction and the vividness of their representation, and which attain their object by appealing impartially to the sympathies of all classes, from the orange-eating street-boy in the gallery to the befeathered and stiff-collared occupants of the stalls. Mr. Vernon had ‘created’

the chief part—that of an aristocratic miscreant, equally at home in the lowest haunts of vice and in the drawing-rooms of Mayfair. He went through his work with the easy grace which had for several years past made him so great a favourite with the public, and which George had already had an opportunity of observing more than once in Manchester.

‘He *is* a handsome fellow,’ he thought; ‘that gives him a tremendous pull at once. There’s no part he is physically unfitted to play, except, perhaps, that of Caliban. And what a splendid delivery he has! A good lesson for me!’

Exciting though the play was, George’s anxiety about himself was too great to allow him to follow it very closely. He longed for the curtain to fall for the last time, and the four acts seemed almost intolerably

long. They came to an end at length, however, and with a sigh of relief George perceived the actor's tall figure advancing towards him.

‘Well—you have survived all that blood and thunder?’ he said with a smile. ‘How did you like the show?’

George uttered a well-turned little speech he had prepared in praise of his new friend's genius.

Mr. Vernon smiled cynically.

‘Wonderful, isn't it? To-day is the two-hundredth time I have played that part, and I suppose we shall go on for another two hundred at least. This way, my boy.’

They turned into Bent Street, one of those curiously deserted and quiet little thoroughfares that lie between the river and the Strand.

‘I'm going to take you to my diggings,

I shall be better able to talk to you there than in this noise. Here we are. Come in.'

Mr. Vernon entered a dingy-looking house of which the door stood open, and led the way up to the first story, where he inserted a latchkey into the lock of a door facing the stairs.

'Little flat, you see,' he observed as George came in after him. 'I've lived here for many years. It's as quiet as the grave and handy for my work.'

A strange sensation came over George as he followed the actor. This was the first time in his life that he had ever entered a gentleman's room—the very first. In a flash of memory he saw again those houses in Manchester, the homes of the gentlemen's sons whom he had so much envied; he saw himself, an uncouthly dressed and awkward-

mannered hobbledehoy, slinking back to the low little public house and to his plebeian father and mother. The memory brought with it a pang which not even the triumph of the moment could wholly overcome, the full force of his ignorance, his utter want of culture swept over him, and for an instant his courage failed him—the gulf seemed too wide, too fathomless for him to bridge. The actor's voice recalled him to himself, reminding him that he already had a part to play, and that it behoved him to play it well.

‘Take your coat off,’ said his host, ‘I’ll be back in a minute,’ and he disappeared into an inner room.

George did as he was told, and took advantage of his solitude to look about him.

The house was evidently an old one, built when men had plenty of time and

materials at their command ; for the room, a spacious apartment with three windows looking out on the street, was wainscotted in worm-eaten oak from ceiling to floor, and had deep seats in each window. The chimney-piece was of antique shape and generous dimensions, but the grate was modern. A faded Turkey carpet covered the fine old oaken boards. The armchairs were of well-worn leather, the curtains were as faded as the carpet—there was not a fresh or new article in the whole room ; everything looked as though a large amount of good service had been extracted from it, and as though it were perfectly ready to go on giving the same for many years more. There was a well stocked bookshelf, a table covered—not littered, everything in the place was in perfect order—with papers and more books, an open piano, a number

of small oil-paintings, water-colour drawings, pen-and-ink sketches, and engravings upon the walls, and a general atmosphere of comfort and excellent tobacco which was very congenial, and which George involuntarily contrasted with the heavy smell of stale smoke and beer which pervaded his ancestral house, and against which his senses had always so persistently rebelled.

Presently his eye fell upon the open piano, and he immediately recalled the wretched little instrument which, at his most earnest and long-drawn-out entreaty, his mother had at last consented to purchase fifth-hand for the extraordinary sum of one pound nineteen and threepence. How pleased he had been when it was installed in the best parlour, how lovingly his fingers had caressed its yellow, rattling key-board, and oh, how disappointed he had felt when

he had found that the middle C was gone ! How tiresome it had been always to be obliged to play the airs he picked out an octave higher, and what a pleasure it was when the apprentice at Cox's music warehouse had mended it for him ! This was a very different sort of affair, full cottage size, with an ebony case and fine white keys. Ay, and he'd be bound the tone was different, too ! Here he walked up to the piano and sat down before it ; and as he did so, the old uneasy certainty of being disturbed by a distant shout of '*George !*' came over him, making him laugh at himself. The next instant he was softly touching the keys, and singing in an undertone one of the little songs which had been such great favourites with his admirers at the Bell and Boot.

He was so absorbed in the pleasure of

the perfectly true sounds which his fingers elicited that he did not hear Vernon come back into the room, and was unconscious that the actor was standing on the hearthrug, watching him. When he had finished his song Vernon said quietly,

‘Well done. That’s a jolly little thing. Is it your own?’

George turned round quickly, a flush mounting to his cheeks.

‘Ay, just a little thing I did long ago.’

‘Know any more?’

‘Oh, plenty,’ answered George with a laugh, and twisting himself back again on the stool, he played and sang straight through his repertory. He was never shy, and the good piano beneath his fingers exhilarated him, while the consciousness of being on his trial made him put forth his best powers.

Vernon sat down, lighted a cigar, and listened. When George came to an end he said kindly,

‘Come, that’s famous! Why don’t you go in for singing? You’ve got a capital voice, though it wants training, of course.’

‘I shouldn’t care to sing,’ said George.

‘Oh well, you know best, though it almost seems a pity. And now, come and sit down, and let us talk seriously. I haven’t very long to give you.’

George took a chair opposite his mentor, and accepted the cigar the latter offered him.

‘How long have you been in town?’ asked Vernon.

‘I came yesterday,’ answered George.

Vernon burst into a laugh.

‘Yesterday! And collars me in the Strand to-day! Well, by Jove, you don’t

intend to let the grass grow under your feet, apparently !’

‘There wouldn’t be much sense in my doing that, would there?’ said George ; ‘it makes no difference to either of us ; if I had been in town for a fortnight or a month and hadn’t got anything to do, perhaps I should have been so down in the mouth that I shouldn’t have had the impudence to speak to you.’

‘Perhaps so. Have you tried anywhere this morning?’

‘I only asked at the Haymarket if I could see Wakefield Todd, but he was engaged or wasn’t there, I don’t know which.’

Vernon laughed.

‘Naturally. I suppose you thought you had only to present yourself with, “If you please, Mr. Wakefield Todd, I’m a young

man from the country," and that he would engage you forthwith, eh?'

'No, I'm not quite so green as all that,' said George, half-nettled. 'But I thought there was no harm in trying. You see I tried to scrape acquaintance with you, and succeeded.'

'In spite of my resolution not to be blarneyed. So you did. But I can't understand now how you did it. You must be either a very intelligent or a very impudent young man. You mustn't expect to be as successful every time, though.'

'Oh, I know that,' said George.

'If one were to put an incident like that into a novel, you know, the critics would be down upon you in a moment. "So far-fetched!" "So utterly improbable!"'

'Truth is stranger than fiction,' sententially observed George.

‘Yes, that’s a truism that holds good always. Dear me, what strange things one has seen in one’s life,—and what a blackguardly old world it is, with all its rotten pretence and solemn humbug! And you want to become that double humbug—an actor.’

‘I want to, and I shall,’ replied George confidently.

‘Well, you’ve got pluck — there’s no denying that. And what line do you think of taking up?’

‘It’s all one to me how I begin,’ said George, ‘so long as I do begin. Of course I should like to *become* an actor like yourself.’

Vernon laughed.

‘Like me! That’s very flattering, my friend, but it sounds better than it is. First of all, you will never be an actor

like myself. You will either be better or worse.'

'Why?' asked George.

'I'll tell you. You see, I was not brought up to any profession. I was what people call—heaven save the mark!—a gentleman by birth. I went to Oxford, took my degree, came into a good lot of property, saw "life" on the Continent and in London until my purse was empty, and then—well then, as I had gleaned nothing from an expensive education except how to get through any amount of money, and as I foolishly shrank from going to the work-house, I became—an actor.'

'You had no vocation?' asked George.

Vernon gave the short bitter laugh which was already familiar to George.

'Vocation! Not I. I could speak the Queen's English, and was pretty adaptable

by nature, I suppose — but vocation ! Oh no, I never was a youthful worshipper of the footlights, I never yearned to exhibit my manly proportions in tights and Hessians, or in trunk hose and silk stockings. No, my friend, I am quite aware that I am letting myself down in your enthusiastic eyes when I say so, but nevertheless it is the truth, and must out—I became a clown because I had come to the end of my resources, and because a clown is well paid—as indeed he deserves to be.

He relighted his cigar, which had gone out, and threw the match into the fire with a jerk.

‘Shocking, isn’t it? But that’s why I say you will never be an actor like myself. You have enthusiasm, you deliberately choose your career out of several that are doubtless open to you. I should think

there are several things you could do as well as act. Are you what is called educated ?'

'I have never had any regular education,' said George, reddening.

'So much the better for you—for your mind has not been forced into any particular groove. You have a good voice, therefore you might take up singing. You might become a clerk, a railway porter, a commissionaire—oh, no offence,' as George made a movement, 'any of those walks of life are quite as honourable as an actor's ; or, as you have evidently a pretty fancy, you might take to literature, or become a critic and reviewer. To fit oneself for the two latter takes time though, and you want to be earning money at once. I only mention these things in order to show you that you make your decision from choice, and not of

necessity. Now I was incapable of any of them. I couldn't become a clerk, because I have no head for figures and my writing is vile ; I am not strong enough for a railway porter and not patient enough for a commissioner ; I have as little imagination as a cat, and I—like yourself—couldn't wait until my reviews and criticisms acquired an intrinsic value of their own. Therefore, as there was nothing else I could do, I took to the stage, and now people say I'm a born actor.'

All this was no doubt very interesting, though George did not believe a word of it, but was convinced that the actor was simply talking for effect ; and, besides, he was all-impatient to get to the much more important discussion of his own affairs. He therefore remained silent when the actor paused, taking care, however, to look ex-

ceedingly sympathetic. His little touch of diplomacy had the desired effect, for with a conscious laugh Vernon left off talking about himself, and said,

‘So you’ll take anything that is to be got, I suppose?’

‘Ay, gladly!’ answered George. ‘Should I go to an agent, do you think?’

He asked this for the sake of letting Vernon know that he was not counting too much upon his good offices.

‘Oh, I should think we can do better than that for you. A personal introduction is worth a hundred agents. I’ll stand sponsor for you as far as I am able, and I know all the managers, of course. It shall go hard if we can’t get you something, however small, between this and six weeks’ time. You can hold out till then, I suppose?’

‘Yes,’ said George.

‘And meanwhile you ought to take some lessons in pronunciation, so as to get that northern burr out of your throat.’

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t afford that,’ said George, with a thought of Mr. Jarvis.

Vernon hesitated a moment, then he said,

‘Well, look here. It isn’t in my way at all, and I daresay I shall be making an awful fool of myself; but I don’t mind giving you an hour or two a week myself, just for a bit. You see you are taking it out of me all round,’ he added, with a half-shame-faced laugh.

George was profuse in his thanks, which the other cut short with an Englishman’s proverbial dislike of anything approaching gush.

‘And now I must turn you out,’ he said,

jumping up, 'for I'm going out to make a call, and must be off at once. Stay, give me your address.'

George wrote it down.

'That's all right. A little out of the way, isn't it? But that doesn't matter. Look here, if you like, we might drive together as far as Cavendish Square. Wait here for me a minute or two.'

George accepted his new friend's offer gladly, and sitting down, began to think over the wonderful events of the last few hours. What a beginning! What glorious luck he had had! He half wondered at Vernon's readiness to make friends with an utter stranger, and reflected that he had not asked him one single question as to his antecedents. 'How different from a woman,' he thought. 'Both Mrs. Mellon and Lucy wanted to know all

about me from my birth upwards directly. But I suppose that was partly with a view to the rent. It's curious how cursedly proud all these aristocrats are'—to George Collins, Vernon was an aristocrat—'of their birth! He dragged that in, of course. And I daresay his story is about as true as the one I told that pretty little Mellon girl last night! Ah well! I'll make the most of his lessons, though—his offering to give me some isn't the least part of my luck.'

'Have a brandy and soda before we go?' asked his host, coming back.

'No, thanks.'

'Come along then,' and they went out into the street, getting a hansom in the Strand. It was delightful to George to be sitting beside the well-known actor, who received nods and looks of recognition without number as they swiftly bowled

along, and he wished the distance to Cavendish Square had been twice as far.

The cab stopped at the door of a smart-looking house at the same moment as a victoria drawn by two magnificent bays. A lady got out and gave Vernon a bright smile as he took off his hat.

‘Good-bye, old fellow,’ said the actor hurriedly ; ‘twelve to-morrow, then.’

The lady and he went into the house together, leaving George to pursue his way homeward, carrying with him a vision of a pale face and two curiously gleaming eyes, set in an aureole of golden hair.





CHAPTER X

REVELRY

It was quite dark before George, after mistaking his way several times, and asking it a great many more, at length reached Hypatia Street. He was weary, both in mind and body, as he climbed the flight of steps, which gleamed white in the faint light, but he felt that his first day in London had not been wasted. It seemed quite like coming home to run down to the warm, bright sitting-room, and to find Lucy sitting busily at work, and the cloth laid for supper.

‘Here you are!’ she said, looking up with a welcoming smile. ‘Ma and me have been wondering if you’d got lost, or got into bad company.’

‘I have been in company, Miss Lucy, but not bad, far from it!’ answered George, who was dying to talk to some one; and sitting down close to the work-table, he told her all his adventures. Lucy dropped her work and listened with eyes and lips wide open.

‘Lor!’ she exclaimed. ‘Well, I declare, if that don’t beat all. You actually went and spoke to Richard Vernon! And he’s got to be your friend—I never, never did! Ma!’ she called, ‘come here, come quick!’

Mrs. Mellon came running into the room with a frying-pan in one hand.

‘What is it, my dear? Is anything wrong?’

‘Wrong! Not quite. Just listen here,’ and she poured forth a repetition of George’s story, with a good many additional flourishes of her own.

‘No, I nevaire—nevaire did hear such a thing!’ cried the little woman, as excited as her daughter; and dropping the frying-pan, which was fortunately empty, she flung her arms round George, and bestowed upon him a maternal salute.

‘Well, I’m sure, ma!’ said Lucy, bridling.

‘Thank you very much, ma’am,’ George said with a laugh. ‘Won’t you follow a good example, Miss Lucy?’

‘Certainly not, sir!’ returned Lucy, highly delighted, and the two ladies giggled in chorus.

Just then a key was heard in the front door. Mrs. Mellon ran out of the room.

‘Mr. Jarvis, Mr. Jarvis!’ she called up the stairs. ‘Come down here quickly!’

Mr. Jarvis flew rather than walked downstairs, and asked breathlessly,

‘What’s the matter?’

‘Come in, come in,’ cried the little woman, seizing him by his coat and dragging him into the sitting-room, ‘come in and hear the news.’

Lucy, nothing loath, repeated the wondrous tale once more. Mr. Jarvis received it with a good deal more equanimity than the two women, and contented himself with congratulating George in a significantly melancholy tone.

‘And we will celebrate the happy occasion, too,’ said Mrs. Mellon enthusiastically. ‘Look, good Mr. Jarvis, here is eighteenpence, run to the fish shop at the

corner, like a excellent man as you are, and buy a lobster, a good one.'

Good Mr. Jarvis looked particularly blank at this request, but at Lucy's 'Brayvo, ma !' he resigned himself.

'And I'll stand some beer,' said George, not to be outdone. 'Bring four bottles of Bass with you as well, if you don't mind, Mr. Jarvis.'

Mr. Jarvis looked daggers, but once more his beloved's applause decided him, he took the money, and sulkily mounted the stairs much more slowly than he had come down them. At the top he heard Lucy's voice call him in unwontedly sweet accents.

'Mr. Jarvis !'

'Yes, Miss Lucy ?'

'Mind the lobster is a good heavy one, and take care not to shake the beer, as you did last time.'

The sound of a muttered imprecation floated through the hall as Mr. Jarvis flung his hat on his head and banged the door behind him.

Mrs. Mellon and her frying-pan retired again to the kitchen, and Lucy took up her work once more.

‘It’s just like coming home!’ said George warmly. ‘You and your mother are the kindest women I ever saw!’

‘I’m sure I don’t know what we’ve done to make you say so, Mr. L’Estrange. It’s only natural we should be pleased at your good luck.’

‘Ah, I didn’t think, when I went out this morning, that I should have had anything half as jolly as that to tell you!’

‘No, nor did I.’

‘Hark, what’s that?’ exclaimed George.

presently, as a heavy bump sounded against the front door.

‘It can’t be pa!’ said Lucy, looking at the clock. ‘Oh—I know, it’s Mr. Jarvis, he’s got his arms too full to open the door for himself.’

‘I’ll let him in,’ said George, and running up, he opened the door, outside which in effect stood Mr. Jarvis, with four beer-bottles piled up in his arms, and a newspaper parcel, out of one end of which depended a long red claw propped between the bottles and his chin.

‘Did you make that noise with your head, old man?’ asked George jovially, noticing that his fellow-lodger’s hat had fallen off, and picking it up for him.

Mr. Jarvis stalked in as majestically as his burden would allow, not condescending to answer a question which he considered vulgar and impertinent.

George offered to relieve him of the lobster, but he shook his head, and went downstairs in an exasperatingly slow manner, landing at length in the kitchen, and presenting his freight to Mrs. Mellon as though it had been a votive offering.

Mrs. Mellon and Lucy, only too glad, poor souls, of any pretext for a little jollification, began bustling round the table, bringing out pickles and sauces, making fresh mustard, losing and hunting for the corkscrew, and making the place quite gay with their laughter and chatter. George undertook to concoct a special dressing for the lobster, and Mr. Jarvis was given the beer to open, wherein he failed ignominiously, letting one cork fly into Lucy's face and breaking the second in the bottle. He tried to make up in dignity what he

lacked in skilfulness ; but nobody took any notice of him, although George was fully alive to his presence, and was quite aware that he was rapidly becoming mortally jealous.

‘ My dressing’s done ! ’ announced the hero of the evening.

‘ So are the sausages ! ’ said Mrs. Mellon, bringing in a smoking hot dish.

‘ Let us begin then,’ said George.

‘ Yes, let us commence ’—this from Mr. Jarvis.

‘ Do you consider commence a better word than begin ? ’ asked George.

‘ It is more elegant, I think,’ returned Mr. Jarvis.

‘ H’m — it sounds stilted to me,’ said George reflectively. ‘ What do you think, Miss Lucy ? ’

‘ I always say commence myself,’ answered

Lucy modestly. 'I notice they always do in the novelettes.'

'Of course, it's always commence in literature,' said Mr. Jarvis pompously.

'I always too say commence,' observed Mrs. Mellon, 'because it is more like my French *commencer*.'

'Then I'm in a minority,' said George—
'and yet, I'm not sure that I'm not right.'

'Ask Mr. Vernon about it,' suggested Lucy.

Mr. Jarvis mumbled something into the claw of his lobster, but did not venture to say anything offensive aloud. His heart was very sore, poor man, for he felt that Fate was treating him cruelly in sending another, taller, younger, better-looking than himself, to share the place by his Lucy's side so long filled only by himself. It was not until the lobster was a memory, and

the beer low in the bottles, that Mr. Jarvis was able to feel once more that life was worth living. At that point, however, he quite suddenly cheered up immensely, ending by becoming the most wildly jovial of the party, flinging superior knowledge and dignity to the winds, and promising to take them all to Hampton Court or Epping Forest, whichever they liked best, the first fine Sunday. He insisted upon giving them an imitation of a brass band, which he said was the cleverest thing out, and if the laughter of the auditors had anything to do with its merits it must have been very clever indeed. Not to be outdone, Mrs. Mellon followed suit with an old-fashioned French *chansonnette*, full of ogles, *double-ententes*, and little runs, of which no one understood one word, but which was vehemently applauded all the same. It was George's

turn next, and as excitement and beer had wrought him to an extreme pitch of sentimentality, he recited, one after another, half-a-dozen pathetic poems, all dwelling upon various phases of domestic misery, which had always taken particularly well 'up yonder,' and which this evening had the satisfactory effect of reducing his hearers to tears—two of them, that is, for Mr. Jarvis, after punctuating the first with loud snuffles and sobs, sank peacefully off to sleep with his head in his plate, thus escaping having his feelings harrowed any further.

Things were still in this blissful state when a heavy foot was heard to mount the steps outside, and a key was inserted in the front door.

'There's pa!' said Lucy in a surprised tone. 'Whatever makes him so early, I wonder?'

With wonderful celerity the remains of the feast disappeared, Mr. Jarvis was shaken awake, and Mrs. Mellon had shut herself up in the kitchen, before the master of the house appeared.

He was sober to-night, and none the more amiable for that. He looked round with a scowl.

‘Still up! Dear me, this is extraordinary!’

‘Will you have some supper, pa?’ asked Lucy, whose too-pale cheeks had got a pretty flush on them, and whose hair had become a little loosened, giving a most becoming softness to her face.

‘No, I won’t! Bring me some brandy.’

‘There isn’t any in the house.’

‘Then go and get some.’

‘No, pa, you’ve had enough at the Hall, I’m sure,’ said Lucy quietly.

Her father glared at her, and was

apparently going to make some violent retort, when he caught sight of Jarvis, who was sitting bolt upright, staring at him with what Mellon took for ferocity, but which was really only a desperate effort to keep his eyes open. Mr. Mellon, a bully *pur sang*, remembering that he owed Jarvis money, thought better of it, therefore, and let his daughter alone. Lucy covered up her work, said good-night, fetched her mother, and the two women went to bed.

‘I shall go up too, I think!’ said George, having no inclination to wind up the pleasant evening by a conversation with his landlord, who, he saw, was disposed to be quarrelsome. ‘Are you coming, Jarvis?’

‘Yes,’ said Mr. Jarvis with startling alacrity, jumping to his feet.

‘Good - night, sir!’ politely observed George.

‘Oh, good-night, and be d——d to you,’ growled Mr. Mellon.

‘Certainly,’ said George cheerfully, and shut the door behind him.

Mr. Jarvis mounted the stairs almost as slowly as though he were still laden with the beer and lobster. At the top he turned round, and with blinking eyes said in a tone of intense solemnity,

‘Promise me one thing, L’Estrange.’

‘And that is——?’

‘That you won’t get in my light with Miss Lucy. I know I’m not brilliant or fascinating’—George cast a comical look at the spare little figure before him, whose sandy hair stuck out in all directions like a porcupine’s quills—‘I know I have but few natural advantages, but I have

loved her long—too long! and if you step between us I shall expire of grief.’

‘I won’t step between you, never fear,’ said George consolingly. ‘Don’t worry yourself. You get to bed, or we shall have that sweet old gentleman below calling out to us.’

At this idea Mr. Jarvis’s eyes grew round with apprehension. He hurriedly grasped his rival’s hand, and disappeared into his own sanctuary.





CHAPTER XI

THE MANAGER

GEORGE was just coming out of his room the following morning, on his way to keep his appointment with Mr. Vernon, when the door opposite his opened a little way, and a hoarse voice, which he recognised as that of his landlord, said in a low tone,

‘That you, Mr. L’Estrange?’

‘Yes,’ answered George, ‘do you want anything?’

The door opened an inch or two wider, and Mr. Mellon’s purple nose appeared.

‘Jus’ come here a second, there’s a good feller.’

George obediently approached, and Mr. Mellon whispered confidentially,

‘Sorry to trouble you—but I had a run of ill-luck yesterday—mostly do have ill-luck—and I’m stumped, cleaned-out—so I must ask you to return that four bob I lent you yesterday mornin’.’

‘Four bob!’ exclaimed George. ‘You’re making a mistake, sir. It was half-a-crown, not four bob.’

‘Hush—sh!’ whispered Mr. Mellon, apprehensively glancing towards the room in which Lucy and her mother slept. ‘I think, if you’ll take the trouble to recollek, it *was* four bob. *I* remember, ’cos I know I had two florins and half-a-dollar in my pocket, an’ when I went out yesterday mornin’ I had only the half-dollar, so it

must have been the two florins I lent you, musn't it ?'

'Nothing of the kind,' said George firmly. 'It was this very half-crown which you forced upon me. Here it is, and here's eighteenpence on to it—but remember I don't owe you that.'

Mr. Mellon took the four shillings with alacrity.

'Thanks, dear boy!' he said. 'I was sure you'd remember it when you came to think of it. Wisest always to make a note of these little things, eh ?'

He shut his door, leaving George half-vexed and half-amused.

'So that was his little game, was it ?' he thought ; 'not a bad dodge. I daresay it's answered many a time before now. But you don't borrow any more half-crowns on those terms, George, my boy

—they're too high for a pauper like you !'

He had got into the street when he heard his name called, and, turning round, saw Lucy standing at the front door, holding out something to him. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright.

'Here, Mr. L'Estrange, here's your eighteenpence. Pa remembered about it directly you were gone.'

'Thanks, Miss Lucy,' said George, taking his money and thinking he had been too hasty in his judgment, for, shrewd as he was, it never occurred to him that the eighteenpence had come out of Lucy's own poor purse, and not out of the capacious depths of her father's pocket.

He found Vernon ready to go out.

'I'm going to take you to one of the best—in every sense—managers in London,'

he said. 'Fellowes of the Thespis. If you can get in with him you'll be all right. He's rather a rough diamond, but a splendid business-man, and sticks to his people when once they've done well for him. I daresay he hasn't got anything to give you just now, but it would be quite worth your while to wait a week or two and then get in there rather than get taken on anywhere else at once.'

As they walked along Vernon continued,

'That was Fellowes's house I went to last evening. He's made a big pile in these last years, and lives in very good style. You meet some of the jolliest people in town there.'

'Was that his wife who went in with you?' asked George.

'Yes, that was Mrs. Fellowes,' said

Vernon dryly, and something in his tone prevented George from following up his question.

The Thespis was a comparatively new theatre, and had been built by Fellowes himself, so Vernon informed George, at a tremendous expense. It was a gorgeous building, with marble and mosaic, gilding and plush everywhere, except in the manager's own room, into which the privileged Vernon at once took his protégé, and which was furnished with the utmost simplicity.

There, in a wooden armchair, puffing out clouds of smoke, sat a stout, burly, red-faced man, with a thick bull-neck, small brown eyes, and reddish hair cut close to his head. He nodded carelessly as the two men came in, but cast a sharp look at George, and asked at once,

‘That the young man you were speaking about yesterday, Vernon?’

Mr. Vernon introduced George, who felt very nervous.

‘Sit down. Have a weed?’ and he pushed over a box of very choice cigars lying open on the table.

He and Vernon then proceeded to discuss the theatrical world in general, while George sat by, listening with all his ears, and feeling that, although he had not said a word, he was being gauged through and through by the sharp little brown eyes which twinkled so persistently at him, until they almost seemed able to pierce into his very soul.

James Fellowes had begun life, as he had not the slightest objection to tell any one, something after the same fashion as Mr. Jarvis—that is to say, as odd boy in a

merchant's office. His father, a poor and unsuccessful small shopkeeper with ten children besides James, never gave him anything beyond a bad example from the time he was thirteen, and he used, every Saturday, religiously to bring his little earnings to his mother, his heart full of rage at not being able to help her more substantially. One day he came home earlier than usual, and found the brokers in the house, and his mother sitting crying in her room, with a piteous little pile of things spread out on the bed before her—old-fashioned ornaments which he remembered from a child, a yellowed embroidered baby's frock, musty and rotten with age, the family Bible which she had subscribed for in the first year of her marriage, in which were entered the names of all the children, and between whose gilt-edged pages were

pressed various leaves and flowers, dating from long ago, when she was still young, and believed in possible happiness. He took in the pitiful picture at a glance, shut the door upon it, and went away without a word. In the shop downstairs his father was huddled up on the stool before the desk, his gray head bent upon his hands, the image of apathetic despair. James asked and learned the amount of the debt. It was for the rent—two quarters. He ran at full speed back to his employer's office, and although Mr. Patterson was known to be a hard man, something in the boy's wild earnestness touched him, and he advanced the money. That evening the house was their own again; the mother, her relics safe once more, sat with the traces of recent tears still visible upon her faded cheeks, looking

proudly at her helpful son ; the father was already talking in his usual feeble way about the profits certain to be made 'next year'—but the iron had entered deep into James's soul, and that day he put away childish things for ever. He would drag his mother out of the mire yet, he vowed to himself, and with this end in view he toiled early and late, the first to arrive, the last to leave, always the one to volunteer any extra service, thinking no drudgery too hard, no detail too trivial. All day long he ran errands, stuck stamps on letters, did the bidding of twenty masters, always alert and cheerful, and ever on the watch for some opportunity of improving his position. With infinite labour he taught himself commercial French, studying at home far into the night, by the light of one poor candle, driving verbs and numbers

into his aching head with indomitable perseverance. His reward was slow but sure. Step by step he crept upwards, until at twenty he was getting thirty shillings a week, with the promise of a further rise. One by one his brothers and sisters were taken by death, until he was the only one left at home; but so absorbed was he, so held by the desire of his life, that he scarcely noticed how quiet the old house had become, nor how the table which formerly had to be so long to hold them all had gradually shrunk and shrunk until it occupied but a fourth of its old space. Still, week by week, he brought his salary home to his mother, and it was one Saturday, as he handed over the meagre coins to her, that he suddenly became aware that she was getting old. Her hair was scanty and gray, her dress hung upon her thin frame,

and when she got up to put the money away, he saw that she was feeble and bent. A new terror seized upon him. What if she should die before he had brought her comfort? He had worked with all his might, and had only been just able to prevent a repetition of that one never-to-be-forgotten scene. At the same rate of progress his mother would be in her grave before he could relieve her once for all of daily care and anxiety. That night his books were laid aside, while, in the poverty-stricken room he had occupied from childhood, and which he thought quite good enough for himself, he walked up and down, backwards and forwards, his brain on fire, a fresh resolve fast shaping itself in his mind.

On Monday he asked his mother to lend him the sovereign he had given her on

Saturday. He took it, and that evening, instead of going home, he went to a gambling place he knew of, deliberately staked his money four times, and won each time. He was not elated, he had known almost with religious certainty that he would win. He paid his mother back the sovereign and kept the rest, a small beginning indeed, but which, backed by a will like his, meant the fortune it became. In another ten years James Fellowes was a well-known name on the Stock Exchange ; two or three times he had made a successful coup which had brought him thousands of pounds, and rarely was he tempted into an unsafe speculation.

Relieved from the fear which had haunted him, James first established his mother—his father was dead long since—in all comfort and luxury, and then began

to look about him. He had long ago left his employer's office and set up for himself, but although he had done what would surely have satisfied any other man, he was not sure that he could not do better. He had always secretly entertained an immense admiration, amounting almost to enthusiasm, for the drama. For many years he had stifled his longing, unwilling to retard his object by even so little as the price of admission to the gallery, but when at length he could gratify it, how intense, how almost painful was his joy! From that time he saw every piece that was produced, and presently the idea took root in him that he would some day have a theatre of his own. He clung to the project with his accustomed tenacity, and speculated meanwhile more hardily than ever. Soon the walls of the Thespi began

slowly to rise from the ground, and the world was informed that James Fellowes was going to turn theatrical manager. This news was the signal for an almost universal prediction of his downfall. He had a bee in his bonnet, a crank in his brain, people said. He knew nothing about theatrical affairs, and would soon come to grief. Others coupled his name with that of a leading actress, celebrated for her beauty and extravagance, and stated on good authority that the Thespis was being built for her. His anxious friends tried to dissuade him from what every one called so rash an undertaking, but James Fellowes only smiled and went his own way. The Thespis was finished, gorgeously fitted up, its owner and manager opened with a new piece from the German—and—Fortune again showered her golden gifts upon him.

This was the man Vernon had brought his protégé to see. George knew nothing of his history, except that he was one of the most successful managers in London. He was surprised at his evident want of education, which was apparent in various slips in grammar and pronunciation, for James Fellowes had never in his busy life had time to study his own language. Once or twice, however, he caught himself up and corrected himself with an impatient frown, which showed that he was not unconscious of his own shortcomings.

‘So you want to go on the stage, young man?’ he asked at length, so abruptly that George started.

‘I do, sir.’

‘Well, Mr. Vernon’s recommendation carries its own weight with it, and he seems to think there’s something in you. I

haven't got anything for the moment I can give you, but we shall be putting a new piece into rehearsal in a fortnight's time, and then we'll see. Meantime, I'll give you a pass, and you can hang round a bit, and get to know your way about. Do you mean work?' he added sharply.

'Yes, sir,' answered George bravely, returning look for look.

'Then you're sure to get on all right. Here, take this, and I shall not forget you.'

He threw his card across to George, after scribbling a word on it, and the interview was over.

'Come to my rooms,' said Vernon, when they got into the street; 'I can give you an hour. You may be quite sure now that Fellowes won't forget you; he's not that sort of man.'

‘I’m awfully indebted to you,’ said George.

‘Nonsense. Your future lies in your own hands—no one can give you much help now.’





CHAPTER XII

EXCURSIONS

GEORGE availed himself of Mr. Fellowes's card of admission that very evening, and for every evening during the next fortnight. He was not certain whether it would gain him admittance behind the scenes or not, and not caring to expose himself to a rebuff, contented himself with the front of the house. The piece had been running a long time, and was one of the many successful plays produced at the Thespis since its erection. James Fellowes had, in his own

rough way, a really lofty idea of the drama, and a firm belief in its mission. He was man of the world enough, however, to keep this to himself, and no one connected with him thought he cared about anything of the sort. He had no intention of making himself a martyr to his convictions, or of letting his enthusiasm carry him and his theatre to destruction. So, while keeping a sharp look-out, and giving himself the trouble to read at least part of every MS. brought to him, he contented himself with producing those pieces which combined the elements of success with a fair amount of literary and ethical value. He declined to go in for Shakespearean revivals; his mind was essentially modern, and he had lived at too intense and rapid a rate to be able to satisfy himself with old-world representations of ever new and recurring per-

sonalities. He leaned more towards the modern German drama, which, if not so sprightly, seemed to him at least more moral than the French, with its eternal illustration of breaches of the seventh commandment, and he had produced one or two adaptations from the former which had enjoyed a long run ; but good pieces, in any language, are hard to find, and Mr. Fellowes was difficult to please. He had for years thought that if only he could discover some man of real literary merit, some uncomprehended and impecunious genius, he would take him up and 'work him,' as he expressed it, to their mutual advantage. He had been looking for a long time now, but had not yet found his *rara avis*. Misunderstood men, men who had failed to get a hearing or a reading, were plentiful, impecunious men were more abundant still,

it was only the genius that was scarce. James Fellowes, however, was not easily discouraged. He was good at waiting, and experience had taught him that, as a rule, all comes to him who knows how to wait. And meanwhile he produced the best he could get—sorry enough rubbish at times, as no one knew better than he, although he would not have acknowledged it to anybody. He was noted in the theatrical world for his just and fair dealings. If he expected his people to work hard and seriously, he was liberal in his salaries, never grudged a word of praise in the right place, and was always ready to pay a good price for a good thing.

Some of this George gathered from Vernon, who seemed to know Fellowes very well, although for some reason or other he did not care to talk about him,

and it was only by dint of persistent questioning that George could extract any information at all on the subject of the man who, he hoped, was soon to be his employer. George went regularly to Vernon for lessons, and the latter was astonished at the aptitude of his pupil, and at the success of his dogged resolve to be rid of his North-country accent. Demosthenes himself never worked harder than George to improve his speech, and day by day the uncouth burr softened down into tones more befitting the critical ear of a London audience.

Nor did he waste his time in other respects. He knew what an immense amount of general culture was lacking to him ; he understood that beside a man like Vernon, who did not pretend to any particular degree of intellectual prowess, but who had had a public school and university

education, he, with his desultory scraps of information picked up here and there at hap-hazard, was like a pigmy beside a giant. He knew that he had everything to learn—the science of civilised life as well as the science of books. He felt within himself a boundless capacity for study, a raging thirst for the knowledge which should make him able to stand on an equal footing with the men of the world he meant to live in. It was too late for him to obtain that classical training which somehow seems to be the foundation-stone of all culture ; but although he could never become either a Greek or Latin scholar, translations were within his reach and time was at his command. Through Vernon he got a reader's ticket for the British Museum, and there, day after day, he spent many hours, flitting, like the most industrious of

bees, from book to book, skimming, noting, imbibing, never coming away the same as on entering, but every time casting a shred more of the slough of George Collins, of the Bell and Boot, and putting on another scale of that successful, brilliant creature who was to be known to London as George L'Estrange, actor, poet, and dramatic author. And all the time he kept his object before him ; the books whose magic tongues were whispering all around him never cast their glamour upon him ; he loved them not for themselves, not because in them lay oblivion of mundane cares and vanities, not because he who knows, has drunk of the Magic Water of Life, and need fear neither Life nor Death ; he never felt that a man who loves books has need neither of wealth, nor mistress, nor child—they were to him only the key with which he would be able to

unlock the doors of prosperity and fame, the armour which it was necessary to have before engaging in the contest with foes armed cap-à-pie. It was already much that he, the son of the untaught, illiterate, and common-minded old Collins, should so thoroughly understand the necessity of education, should know so exactly which things it was wise to acquaint himself with, and which it was no use wasting his time over. He never became profound—an expert, a specialist could always soon get to the bottom of his knowledge on any subject; but then that only made the experts and specialists like him all the better, and George soon learned that one of the secrets of *savoir vivre* is not always to know as much as the person you are talking to. There is a discreet way of hinting that although one knows a great deal, the other

person knows still more, and this George often found very useful in getting out of any little difficulty that ignorance had betrayed him into. Besides this, he early became an adept in that art which consists in taking a person's speech out of his mouth, and repeating it to him in such a manner that he shall be persuaded that you have arrived at the same conclusions as himself with reference to his pet subject by an independent course of study. George would talk upon Art, and artists would look at him with interest, nod their heads sagely, and invite him to their studios; upon Music, and musicians would straightway sit down, and play to him all their own compositions; upon the Drama, Shakespeare and the Elizabethan dramatists, and managers, actors, and playwrights would say: 'That fellow has something in him.' And

so he had, as he himself very well knew.

It was six weeks before he heard anything from the Thespis, but the time did not seem long to him. Besides his studies with Vernon and at the British Museum, there was what may be called his home life ; for Mrs. Mellon and Lucy seemed quite to have adopted him, and treated him more as a son and a brother than as their natural prey, a lodger. And yet Lucy did not really look upon him as a brother, although she called him George and mended his linen for him, nor did George quite think that she did. She could laugh at Mr. Jarvis's awkwardly tender ways, but the first time that George called her 'dear' she blushed crimson, and did not raise her eyes or speak for at least an hour afterwards. She took a long time every night curling

her fair hair, and bought a pot of cold cream to rub on her hands when she went to bed, significant personal attentions which would never have occurred to her if Mr. Jarvis had lived beside her until he was as old as Methuselah. She wondered whether George noticed how much softer-looking her hands had become. She remembered with what enthusiasm he had spoken of a well-known actress's beautiful hands. She thought George the perfection of a young man—so handsome, so clever, determined, and strong. He was just like a hero out of the penny novelettes, with his poems and his songs, and his soft way of looking into one's eyes.

Mr. Jarvis, after watching the progress of things until his heart was nearly broken, took to spending his evenings out. *He* had noticed the extra row of curls on Lucy's

head, *he* had observed the care she had suddenly begun to take of her hands—those rather large, plump hands he had watched so often, with the left forefinger pricked and scarred by the needle, and the dimple at each wrist. These things boded ill for him, he knew, and he rushed into a wild course of dissipation, accompanying his landlord often to the Star, where he sat and smoked bad cigars and drank worse liquor until his trouble faded somewhat, and in the nausea occasioned by these wild revelries he temporarily forgot the cruelty of his adored one.

For George it was very pleasant to come back each evening to so warm a welcome. He had all the advantages of home—a snug supper in a bright cosy room, the best seat by the fire, his slippers put ready for him, his tastes consulted, and a pretty, kindly

young woman always waiting to greet him, and to hear all he had been doing during the day. Lucy was a capital little friend to have, and he called himself a lucky fellow to have made her acquaintance. Into her admiring ears he poured his newly acquired stores of learning, flattered by her naïve adulation, and relishing her unstinted and exaggerated praise.

George had arrived in London in January, when the evenings were still chilly, but with the first days of April came warmth and sunshine, and Lucy and he began the first of many Sunday expeditions. They went to Hampton Court, where George examined the pictures, and Lucy ran away from him in the maze ; they explored Bushey Park, and fed the deer with biscuits ; they went up and down the river on steamboats, with a feeble band and a crowd of pale

fellow-passengers ; they walked to Hyde Park to look at the ‘swells,’ as Lucy called them ; they got to know every corner of Regent’s Park ; they visited the Welsh Harp at Hendon and Jack Straw’s Castle at Hampstead Heath, as well as various other hostelries of renown, many of which Lucy had been to before with the now despised Mr. Jarvis. George enjoyed himself thoroughly on these occasions. Lucy was so good and amiable a companion, took so unaffected an interest in all that concerned him, was so evidently proud of him, and always looked so pretty and smart, that he grew fonder of her every time he went out with her. She was vastly superior, in every way, to the uncouth Lancashire lasses whom he had known, who had always grated upon those curiously sensitive nerves of his, so alive to everything that had to do with

himself, and so careless of other people's feelings.

‘How clever you are!’ Lucy would sigh, with a worshipping look in her pale blue eyes; and he, while replying with some joking word, would inwardly reflect upon this little milliner's wonderful powers of discernment.

Lucy was a good girl. Her life since her mother's accident had not been a very pleasant one. Before then her father had kept within bounds, and if not a model husband, had always been polite to his wife as to the chief breadwinner of the family; but since Mrs. Mellon had unfortunately ceased to earn money, he had not taken the trouble to keep up appearances, but had become more brutal and more besotted from year to year, until he had wholly estranged the affections of both wife and daughter.

Lucy did not care in the very least for her father nowadays ; she often caught herself thinking, with a callousness that shocked her, what a great mercy it would be if he were to die in one of his drunken fits, or really go off to Australia, as he had continually threatened to do for the last ten years. She did care for her mother, very much more, she thought, than her mother cared for her, and resented her father's ill-treatment of her most bitterly. She was a shrewd capable woman of business, never sparing herself, and, if somewhat hardened by a commonplace and rather melancholy life, as honest and true as gold. She found in George all the qualities desirable in a lover, and straightway gave him her whole heart unreservedly and unaffectedly, as only an honest girl can and will. Their little expeditions had to be conducted in

the most modest and economical manner possible, for George's funds were far from inexhaustible, as he frankly admitted. Lucy would only consent to let him pay her fares on condition that she should furnish the provisions which they generally took with them, only getting their liquids at the inns; and as travelling is cheap, George had very much the best of the bargain.

In the week-day evenings he talked to her, read poetry—his own and other people's—or sat writing while she worked beside him. Lucy's life was very full of George in those days; she neglected her girl-friends, hardly took any notice at all of the faithful Jarvis, and became so patient towards her father as to astonish Mrs. Mellon, who had been wont to find in her an all-attentive and sympathetic listener to

the recital of her connubial woes. George thought he was educating Lucy, and would have been surprised if he had known how very little of what she called his book-learning entered into her understanding. He might discourse to her of all the wisdom stored up for ages past, and she might seem to listen, but all she heard was an old old story to which maidens have always lent a ready ear, and all she learned was that George was very good and very clever, and that she loved him very, very much.





CHAPTER XIII

A FIRST STEP

‘How you do harp on that one string, George L’Estrange, George L’Estrange!’ said Mrs. Fellowes crossly. ‘The man seems to have bewitched you, and I daresay he’s nothing very particular after all!’

‘I’m sorry if I’ve bored you,’ answered Vernon stiffly.

‘Oh dear! How humble we are! Bored me! Of course you’ve bored me. Isn’t one’s mission in life to be bored?’

Vernon gave no answer, but stood look-

ing straight in front of him, while Mrs. Fellowes, from the depths of a very easy chair, lazily regarded him with a curious expression in her strange gray-green eyes.

‘It’s so unlike you to get enthusiastic, too. I’m not sure that it isn’t rather bad form!’

Vernon shrugged his shoulders.

‘Ah, now I’ve nettled you! People in our well-conducted days would rather die than be bad form, wouldn’t they?’

‘There are plenty who are,’ said Vernon.

‘Yes. I suppose you mean my poor James.’

Vernon gave an indignant denial.

‘Oh, but I’m sure you were thinking of him—I’m sure you were. Still, I don’t know that he is bad form. I should rather say that he is or has no form at all. And

that's original, you know ; and originality is, I believe, even more precious than form.'

Silence ensued, during which Vernon fidgeted impatiently.

'Are you in a hurry, Dick ? Or in pain ?' asked Mrs. Fellowes sweetly.

'No—why should I be ?'

'Because you don't seem able to keep still a moment. Come, do sit down, and let us talk amicably, instead of sparring the whole time.'

Vernon cast himself into a chair.

'I didn't begin,' he said.

'No, of course not,' said Mrs. Fellowes soothingly ; 'I did—I always do, it is my nature to. But now be nice again, and tell me some more about your protégé—L'Estrange. First of all, is his name really L'Estrange ?'

‘I don’t know. I never asked him,’ said Vernon, still on the defensive.

‘Oh well, I shall when you bring him to see me. I don’t believe it is—Jones or Smith, more likely. And he was quite wild when you took him in hand, wasn’t he?’

‘I never said so.’

‘Didn’t you? Dear me, I thought you had—in fact, I’m sure you did. Quite wild—those were your very words. Ah now, don’t be so violent. Look, you’ve actually upset my flowers. What a temper you have got!’

‘Quarrelling as usual, you two?’ said James Fellowes, coming in with some papers in his hand.

‘No, not quarrelling,’ answered his wife serenely; ‘it takes two to quarrel, and I never allow Dick to ruffle my temper. It

is he who always takes amiss anything that I may say.'

'Oh, come now, Mrs. Fellowes,' began Vernon, but Fellowes interrupted him genially,

'Let her alone, Dick, let her have her own way. Women are kittle cattle, as we all know.'

'What does kittle mean?' asked Mrs. Fellowes innocently. Fellowes burst into one of his big boisterous laughs, making the china on the little tables rattle, and his wife put up her hands to her ears.

'I don't know—but I do know what it's meant to mean—and so do you, eh Dick?'

'We were talking about Dick's wonderful genius Mr. L'Estrange,' said Mrs. Fellowes gently, when the noise had subsided.

'Ah yes. L'Estrange! By the way, I've kept a part for him in the new piece, Dick.'

‘No, have you, that’s awfully good of you,’ said Vernon.

‘What is it, Jim? Juvenile lead, of course?’ asked his wife.

‘Juvenile lead, indeed! Why, the fellow don’t know how to come into a room! Besides, he’s got an accent fit to knock you down.’

‘Eccentricities of genius,’ suggested Mrs. Fellowes.

‘I never said L’Estrange was a genius,’ said Vernon.

‘Oh, Dick! As if you had said anything else for the last three weeks! But what is his part, Jim?’

‘Has to bring in a letter.’

‘As what?’ asked Mrs. Fellowes, ‘footman, groom, lady’s maid?’

‘Butler,’ said Fellowes.

Oh come, that’s not so bad. Menial of

course—but still an upper servant. What do you think of that, Dick?’

‘That he ought to think himself confoundedly lucky to get it.’

‘And now you want to bring him here, don’t you? It’s very unselfish of you, really.’

‘Why?’ asked Vernon.

‘Why? Because he might fall in love with me, and then there would be your place taken, you know.’

She laughed softly, as she noted his half-cross, half-amused expression.

Fellowes gave another bellow.

‘Well, upon my word, you’re cool enough, Nellie!’ he said. ‘You’re always saying things, in that quiet way of yours, that no other woman in London would dare to say, ain’t she, Dick?’

‘Yes, she is,’ answered Vernon irritably, and Mrs. Fellowes’s eyes, full of mischievous

delight, met his as he spoke. They softened to wistfulness a moment later, but that he did not observe.

‘Then I may bring him in some day?’ he said.

‘Certainly, whenever you like,’ she answered indifferently, and they spoke no more of George.

A few days later Vernon presented himself with his cub, as his own friends had begun to call the young man in whom he was taking so unwonted an interest.

If George had felt emotion on first entering Vernon’s rooms, he was ten times more moved now. His only experiences of womanhood had been confined to his own class, Lucy Mellon even had been rather a revelation to him. In his secret soul he was a little uncertain how to address a lady, not quite sure whether it was not correct

to say Madam or Mrs. He would not have asked Vernon for the world, but resolved to notice how he spoke to Mrs. Fellowes, and to follow suit.

The drawing-room in Cavendish Square was furnished and decorated in the very latest fashion. A little too new some people would have thought it, but to George it seemed lovely beyond description, and a fit setting for the beautiful woman who inhabited it. Mrs. Fellowes was inordinately fond of perfumes, and the air was not only charged with the fragrance of mignonette and lily of the valley, but was also redolent of some strange foreign scent which made the atmosphere heavy and sleepy.

George thought Mrs. Fellowes supremely beautiful. She was rather taller than most women, and although her limbs were sufficiently rounded, she gave the impres-

sion of being much slighter and thinner than she really was. Her face was almost too thin, and very pale, with a clear white skin hardly touched to rose colour on the cheeks; her nose was delicately cut, her brow broad, her mouth at once proud and sad, her hair gold with a warm tinge as of over-ripe corn, and her eyes nearly green. A striking-looking woman—one accustomed to admiration, and expecting it as her right. A strange woman, whom no one understood, who had no friends among her many acquaintances, who lived after her own guise, with an either real or affected indifference to the opinions of the world, well versed in all the scandal of fashionable Bohemia, going out a great deal and entertaining magnificently, but never seeming to care for anything particularly, using her clever tongue amusingly and unsparingly

enough, passionately loved by her husband, and almost as warmly disliked by her detractors.

Helen Fellowes was the only daughter of an army man who, after retiring on half-pay, had dragged himself and his child about the Continent in search of pigeons to pluck for himself and a wealthy husband for her. We all know the kind of man—well-bred, well-preserved, carrying beneath a suave appearance a degree of heartlessness and unscrupulousness which forms the despair of those whose lives are unfortunately linked with his. Helen was as unhappy as it was well possible for a girl to be; her shrewd eyes saw through her father's manœuvres only too well, she felt her degradation every hour of her life,—that awful degradation which works havoc in a woman's mind, makes all things lose their

proper proportions, and predisposes her to a cynical contempt for everything and everybody, herself being placed first in the list. As she was utterly fearless, she braved her father at every point, declined to be sold at his price, and took a malicious pleasure in defeating his wily schemes and projects. *La belle Hélène* she was called among the *roués*, broken-down gentlemen, and fast young men who formed the society to which her father introduced her, and who admired her immensely and feared her not a little. She had a terribly disconcerting way of taking them down, uttering unpalatable home truths, casting aside the thin veil of decent reserve which her father persisted in spreading over designs too plain to be misunderstood, and almost seemed to find a pleasure in flaunting her poverty, her bitter knowledge of the world, her full

comprehension of things which a gentlewoman is supposed to ignore until the day of her death.

Richard Vernon, during a visit to the Continent, had made their acquaintance, and for the sake of her *beaux yeux* had allowed her father to plunder him of more than he could well afford. Vernon was no mere silly boy, eager to prove his manly independence by making as great a fool of himself as possible, and Helen soon found that he stood in no need of the friendly warnings which, when the mood took her, she was in the habit of giving to her father's dupes. She saw that he understood her father perfectly, and that if he allowed himself to lose his money, it was because he chose—for love of her. That she knew was the only reason which could make him come to their lodgings. The beauty which

had already served her father so well was doing its work once more. In vain she tried to keep out of the way, it was no use shutting herself up in her own room; Vernon was patient and her father remorseless. The more repellent she showed herself, the more palpably in love did Vernon become, and the more regularly did he haunt the house. He asked her to marry him, and she refused — why, she could hardly have told, except that she felt more fit to die than to marry any one. His engagements forced him to return to England, and he heard no more of her, until one day she wrote to him from lodgings in London, telling him that her father was dead, and asking him to help her to go on the stage. He went to see her, and found her unchanged both in her beauty and in her resolve not to become

his wife. He introduced her to Mr. Fellowes, who fell violently in love with her at first sight, and shortly afterwards proposed to her and was accepted.

Did she love James Fellowes? That was a question which Vernon had often asked himself, but to which he had never been able to return an answer. She made her husband the happiest of men—if she was somewhat whimsical and capricious, that was in her nature, and was no proof either of coldness or the reverse. She attracted a great deal of attention in the semi-Bohemian world in which they lived, and more than once men, misled by her easy unconventional ways, had ventured too far, only to be put in their right place with a calm, haughty indifference, which caused their cheeks to tingle for many a day afterwards, and very quickly turned their admiration

to something else ; but she had held her own ever since Vernon had first known her, and her coldness was proof rather of fidelity to herself than to her husband. Vernon was the only exception she made. He was allowed to do and say pretty much as he liked, without fear of either extinction or banishment. She treated him as a sister treats a favourite brother, laughing at him, teasing him, provoking him, but withal very ready to be really sympathetic and kind. Fellowes also was very fond of him, and encouraged him to come to the house as often as he chose.

James Fellowes was still passionately in love with his wife, who to him was a beautiful, mysterious enigma, the true meaning of which he was as far from finding out now that they had been married two years as he had been the first time he

saw her. He thought she was very good to him, although in truth the balance lay very much the other way. His old mother never quite understood how such a bright, accomplished, lovely creature could have fallen in love with her good but plain and sober James. To her her daughter-in-law appeared a wonderful vision of beauty, like the good fairy in the pantomimes of her youth; she was always exhorting her son to be careful of his wife, and, unlike the proverbial mother-in-law, extolling her virtues to the skies. Thus Mrs. Fellowes's path had been a pleasant one of late years, and the fine lines that care had drawn about her mouth and eyes were far fainter now than when Vernon had first known her.

This was the woman opposite whom, on the edge of a fine plush-cushioned chair, now sat George L'Estrange, feeling

very much as if he had no business there.

Mrs. Fellowes looked him up and down with her lazy gray eyes; she considered herself an exceptionally good judge of physiognomy. She noted George's showy tweed suit, his pretentious ring, his ill-cut collar and cuffs, and his awkward way of sitting, and inwardly repeated, 'Smith or Jones, never L'Estrange.'

'And how do you like London?' she asked.

'I think it's the most splendid place in the world!' answered George enthusiastically.

'No, do you really? How very nice!' said Mrs. Fellowes languidly. 'And you've a part in the new play, have you not?'

'I have,' replied George earnestly. 'It's

awfully good of Mr. Fellowes to have given it me. I hope I shall do it credit.'

'Oh, no doubt you will—you are sure to do it to the life,' said Mrs. Fellowes. 'What part is it?'

'A butler's,' answered George, and in his eagerness he pronounced the word 'bootler.' 'It isn't a long part, but it'll give me plenty to think of. There's the clothes, you see.'

'The clothes?' repeated Mrs. Fellowes.

'Ay—yes, I mean. It seems to me that the first thing to be thought of when you get a part is to identify yourself as much as possible with it—you must dress yourself into it, live yourself into it. I'm going about now, trying to fancy I'm a butler; I noticed the way your own manservant opened the front door, and also particularly the way he announced us.

All these little details are of importance in my opinion.'

'Of course they are,' said Mrs. Fellowes gravely.

'Yes—of the greatest importance. For instance, I remarked that your butler gave a downward inflection to his voice when he announced Mr. Vernon and myself. Now that is a capital hint for me. I might have done the very opposite when I announced, "Mr. and Mrs. Honeydew, my Lord!"'

'How observant you are!' said Mrs. Fellowes.

'Yes!' agreed George, brightening up, and sitting quite at his ease in his smart chair now; 'so they always said. It's the only way to learn.'

'You come from the North, I think Mr. Vernon told me?' asked his hostess.

‘Yes, from the hard, inhospitable North—but I have a mixture of blood in my veins. One of my ancestors was Spanish—my great-grandmother, I believe.’

‘Indeed,’ said Mrs. Fellowes ; and George, feeling more and more emboldened, drew his chair a little nearer, and went on, lowering his voice confidentially,

‘Yes—and that’s where, I fancy, I get the impatience, the strange yearnings that are in me—that made my childhood wretched and shut me out from my parents’ heart.’

‘Are you not friends with your parents, then ?’

‘No—there is no sympathy between us. All my life long I have been an alien, an outcast. Do you know that this is the first time I have ever spoken to a beautiful lady like you ?’

‘Dear me!’ said Mrs. Fellowes, feeling a strong inclination to laugh.

‘Yes, the first time. And yet,’ continued George, fixing his eyes dreamily on her attentive face, ‘how I have longed for such companionship! How I have envied men whom I have seen—and all the happy lovers of history, for whom beautiful women lived and died! Ah, Mrs. Fellowes, you in your luxurious home little know of the suffering, the starving of hearts that goes on around you.’

Helen Fellowes thought of the tawdry lodgings, of the cheaply showy clothes, of the eternal hunger and thirst of soul that had been her lot for so many years, and her lip curled as she listened. She was ignorant of this man’s past, but she knew from experience, the remembrance of which was sometimes almost too bitter to

be borne, that whatever a man may miss, however he may suffer, his longings, his miseries always fall short of a woman's, for he starts in life with the supreme advantage of being a man. There were memories in her mind which, like a red-hot iron, had seared themselves in so deeply as to be ineradicable—certain words, certain looks, certain insults, every one of which had left her different from what she was before, which she would never cease to recall in the most incongruous places and at the most unlikely times, and the sting of which was as fresh to-day as at the moment they had been inflicted.

She remembered this as she looked at the tall, strong figure before her, and listened half-mockingly to his confidences. There might be many more years of life before her, much pleasure and happiness might

be in store for her, but nothing life could bring her could efface those twenty-three years, and she often thought she would gladly die at any time so as to lose their cruel memory.

Never, however, had it occurred to her to tell any one about these innermost feelings. James Fellowes knew only the bare facts of her life and nothing more; the old acquaintances of her girlhood, Vernon included, were no wiser. She had never gushed at any time; what she suffered she suffered—and in silence. No wonder, then, that a feeling of scorn arose in her mind as George L'Estrange 'liberated his soul' so freely, and that from the very first she conceived a certain distrust of the facile tongue whose glib narrative had so entranced Lucy Mellon.

But not a sign of this was visible

in her beautiful face as she bent a little forward to catch George's lowered tones; and George, inexperienced enough to mistake her polite attention for real interest, went on romancing in his own accomplished fashion, gathering courage as he proceeded, and flattering himself that he was making his *début* into society with a good deal of success.

Vernon, while talking to some other people who were already in the room when he and his protégé came in, watched Mrs. Fellowes and George with some anxiety. He knew Helen too well to be taken in by her serene expression, but not well enough to guess what she was really thinking. Vernon, during these last weeks, had come to have a very high opinion of George L'Estrange's abilities. He knew himself to be lacking in a good many

points, and always regarded his own success upon the stage more as a happy chance than anything else—indeed, he half contemptuously attributed it in a great measure to his personal advantages. Man of the world though he was, he had retained a good deal of the single-heartedness and generosity of youth, together with a modest opinion of himself remarkable in one so flattered and admired. He considered George exceedingly clever, and likely to go far, and this, combined with the recollection that he was in a way his sponsor in London life, gave him a sense of responsibility and real solicitude that his protégé should distinguish himself.

It was he who proposed presently that George should recite something, and he whispered to the others that this young man was a self-taught genius, and was

going to be a light in the London world presently.

George gave one of his own poems, touching in itself, and to which his voice, somewhat hoarse and uncertain from nervousness, gave double pathos.

One of the ladies wiped her eyes the whole time, and Mrs. Fellowes signalled her approbation across to Vernon, who felt like a schoolmaster whose pet pupil has passed his examination triumphantly.

George, who to the end of his career never learned the great art of leaving off, would have gone on reciting for the next hour, but Vernon, wiser than he, at the end of his second poem got up and carried him off; Mrs. Fellowes took a gracious farewell of him, and gave him an invitation to a large At Home for the following week. George walked downstairs as if he were

treading on air, which did not prevent his taking another observation of the butler, who informed the cook, on his return to the nether regions, that ‘that noo young gent, Mr. L’Estrange, was evidently fresh from the country, and was not accustomed to bein’ waited upon by one of his own sect.’

END OF VOL. I

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